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**SELLCUTS' MANAGER**

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# SELLCUTS' MANAGER

BY

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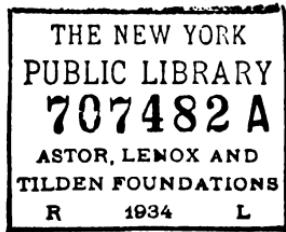
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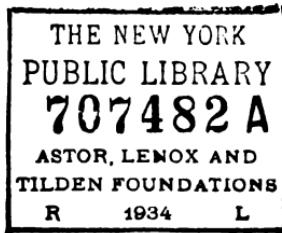
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JOJO WARD  
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## CHAPTER I

### THE BURNING OF SELLCUTS'

THE town had been quiet for about an hour, and by that token Dr. Slaney knew that it was long after one, —and Sunday morning. For Brombridge was conservative in its Saturday night observances, and the times and seasons of Sellcuts' and the Green Grapes were as much to be relied on for giving the hour of midnight, as the bell of the little Carmelite Chapel at 6 A.M., or the singing at the Primitive Methodist Sunday School at 9 A.M., to announce that it was Sunday morning.

Dr. Slaney had put up the last bottle of medicine, and had made the last entry in the day-book, in that surgery of his that faced the High Street ; so he threw himself far back in his chair, and, stretching out his arms, gave a long and loud yawn of satisfaction and fatigue.

Gemini, who had been snoring at intervals on the rug, now pulled himself up in joyful anticipation of the pipe, and stroll in front of the house, as a preparation for turning in, locking up, and the final curl up in the basket outside his master's door.

In a few minutes doctor and dog were standing in

the wooden porch, from which the red lamp looked with a fiery eye on the moonlit street.

'How quiet it is!' said the smoker to himself.

Once a cart rumbled along the upper road with a muffled sound in the wintry mist, and a dog barked in response from the butcher's close by. Then a door opened a little way down the street, and two women and a man came out of one of the houses which had a back entrance into what was known as the 'Cut,' setting off with rapid steps in the direction of the station.

'If that confounded train is punctual in leaving the Junction, we shan't catch it,' said the man as they hurried past the doctor; and the voice was low and quarrelsome.

'Don't walk so fast, you fool,' said one of the women sharply; 'if we catch it, we catch it, and if we don't, we don't, and that's all about it.'

'Well, and isn't that enough?' he growled with an oath; 'if we lose it I shall just walk on to the next town, and you'll have to take care of yourselves.'

By this time they had got out of hearing, and the doctor, who had taken his pipe out of his mouth, smelt a sudden and very powerful smell of paraffin oil, and with it that of burning wood.

Gemini, too, had sniffed something wrong, for he dropped his tail, and began to nose about, finally throwing up his head, and giving vent to an ear-splitting howl, which drew forth a full-throated rejoinder from the butcher's dog, and the cochin-china fowl in the hairdresser's back garden.

The moon at that moment becoming palpably obscure, the doctor glanced up to where it had been shining so brilliantly a short time before, on the glass dome of Sellcuts', and the gilt figure of Joy on the top

## THE BURNING OF SELLCUTS' 3

of the cupola, and saw instead a great haze of thick, black smoke.

'Why, bless my soul,' he exclaimed, 'there must be a fire somewhere!' and, catching sight of the nearing figure of a night constable, he hurried off to give the alarm.

'It's most likely in the stable-yard of the Green Grapes,' said the policeman; and, while he went to arouse the inhabitants of the public-house, the doctor rushed off to summon the Fire Brigade.

In a very short time it seemed as if the whole town was awake and astir, and the cry of 'Fire!' speedily brought a rapidly increasing crowd to the front entrance of the music hall, just as a great tongue of flame leapt up into the smoky moonlight, and cast a savage glory on the soft clouds that hid the stars.

Then a stronger smell of burning wood, and loud crackling, and another and yet another dart of fire glittering, now on the roof of the Carmelite Church, and now on the glowing dome.

'The Hall's alight!' shouted the crowd; 'why aren't the engines going?'

Alas, some wicked hand had been at work, and filled up the hydrant with sand; and, while the flames were rushing madly from point to point, the firemen were toiling at the difficult task of clearing away the obstruction for the insertion of the standpipe.

'If they're much longer about it we shall have some of the other buildings alight before the water comes,' groaned the Mayor.

By this time the frightened horses had been got out of the stables, and were being coaxed or prodded up the narrow passage that led past the public-house into the High Street, and the attention of that part of the crowd had been drawn from the fact that at last the

hose was playing on the already lessening flames, by the mad kicking and plunging of some of the terrified animals, one of whom broke away from the lad who was endeavouring to lead him, and leapt sheer into the window of the hairdresser's shop, close by Dr. Slaney's surgery.

But above the din of smashing glass and shouting that ensued, there rose the piercing shrillness of a woman's shriek.

There was no doubt of its being the voice of a woman, and it came from a small window below the dome, barely showing, from the parapet that ran round it, to the looker-on in the street below.

Just then another distraction occurred in the crowd, and those to the left of the Green Grapes were goaded to further excitement by the dashing of a dogcart down the hill from the upper road, and the appearance of the manager of Sellcuts.

'Here he is! Here's the manager! Three cheers for Mr. Blake!' they shouted in their excitement; and they cheered him just as they had some of them done when two months ago he stood before them, on the boards of the music hall, bowing and smiling his acknowledgments of their welcome.

'Sorry for you,' said the Chief Constable to him in a tone of commiseration. 'My men have just taken up a ladder to rescue two women from the parapet.'

'Two women there?' cried the manager; and, as if in answer to his horrified inquiry, there rang out another shriek over the hissing, crackling, and sputtering, and with it a woman's voice calling, 'Paul! Paul! Paul!'

'Good God!' he cried, 'that's Maggie's voice! It's my wife's,' he said to the official beside him; 'let me get to her!' and he pushed his way to where the

## THE BURNING OF SELLCUTS' 5

firemen were guarding the entrance to the corner house.

By this time one of them had mounted the parapet, and through the open window had dragged the figure of a girl in the spangles and tights of an acrobat. A deluge of hot cinders fell on them both as he lifted her up in his arms and bore her along the narrow ledge, disappearing with her into the skylight of the corner house.

For one brief moment the wind parted the smoke sufficiently for those below to catch sight of the man's brass helmet, and the glittering spangles and satin of his light burden ; and the spectacle was a more impressive one than the footlights had ever shone upon, and would have been more so had those who saw known that it was the last sight of those two, acting out the brief drama of their life at the close.

Hardly had they disappeared from the anxious gaze of the watchers below, when a whole stack of chimneys fell with a terrific crash into the stable-yard of the Green Grapes, and this being followed by an explosion, the glass dome flew up in a million splinters, while the figure of Joy and the cupola sank down into the blazing auditorium below.

Then there was fresh panic among the crowd, for a figure in a velvet dress stood out upon the parapet in awful relief against the flaming rafters of the roof behind her, while a voice cried out in still more agonising tones than before, ' Paul ! Paul ! Paul ! '

One moment more, and a black-coated man, not a fireman, sprang up the ladder, stepped firmly along the narrow ledge, and, seizing the figure by the shoulders, walked slowly backwards, gained the top of the ladder in safety, handed her carefully down to the fireman waiting below, and disappeared also into the corner house, as the rescuer of the acrobat had done.

Then the voice of the crowd, held silent in those moments of suspense, suddenly broke loose in such a storm of weeping and cheering as had never been heard in that street before ; for, after all is said and done, there is nothing greater in the world than successful heroism, and the deed that had just been accomplished was great enough for those who witnessed it to know that a hero was in their midst.

Meanwhile the woman in the velvet dress had collapsed, and was being carried by the manager and the Chief Constable through the throng into the doctor's surgery.

It was the Baptist minister who put the latch-key into the doctor's lock for him, and opened the door for the little procession ; and as he did so, he said to Mr. Blake, 'God bless you, sir, you are a brave man, and if I have ever thought or said hard things of your calling, I beg your pardon.'

'Thank you for saying so,' rejoined Mr. Blake in a tone of deep feeling.

Very soon a strikingly beautiful young woman was lying on the doctor's sofa, and the dazzling whiteness of her skin was enhanced by the masses of red-gold hair that fell over the pillow, and by the black dress with its black jet ornaments. By and by she opened her eyes very slowly, passed her hand—such a snowy hand—up to her head, and murmured faintly—

'Am I burned ?'

'Oh no !' cried the doctor cheerily, 'only just a little singeing of the hair, and that will make it grow all the better, you know.'

'Where's Paul ?' she said, trying to raise her head, and sinking back again, quite unable to do so.

'He was here but a moment ago,' replied the

## THE BURNING OF SELLCUTS' 7

doctor ; 'I daresay he's brushing the cinders off his hair and clothes.'

'I wish I were dead !' she said, with such emphasis that the doctor jumped.

'Hush ! You mustn't say that,' he said sternly. 'You ought to be thankful that God has spared your life.'

'They gave me such a lot of gin,' she went on. 'Where are they ? Why didn't he come and let us out ?'

The doctor made her drink something out of a medicine glass, and asked in a casual voice, 'How much have you had ?'

'They said they wouldn't tell,' she answered, looking at him with the sly expression of a hunted animal ; 'Paul will send me away if he gets to know.'

'So you've got her round,' said the manager quietly, and at the sound of his voice she began to tremble.

'Give me a brandy-and-soda !' she cried.

'No, indeed ! You've had too much already.'

The manager said this rather under his breath, and Dr. Slaney looked at him in some amaze at the exceeding gentleness of his manner under such trying circumstances.

'Come !' continued the husband, 'I think you are ready to go home now ; it's four o'clock, or so, and the doctor wants to go to bed.'

'Does he ?' she asked quite simply.

'But she can't drive through the streets in that condition,' said Dr. Slaney, alluding to her insufficient clothing.

In a moment she had turned on him like a fury, and her strange eyes glittered with a mad light as she

shouted, 'What d'you mean? I'm not so drunk as all that!'

'No, no!' said her husband soothingly, as he held her by the wrist; 'how silly you are! He only means that you must have something warm round your shoulders. It's a very cold morning, and you ought to be in bed.'

There was no difficulty with her after this, and they got her into the dogcart, wrapped up in the doctor's plaid travelling-rug; and the latter watched them drive off.

But when they got out of sight he sat down to think it out over another pipe—'Such a beautiful creature, and soaked with liquor! Such a fine fellow for a husband! I can't make it out, and I'd like to know who the dickens could.'

## CHAPTER II

### SUNDAY MORNING AFTER THE FIRE

IT was long after eleven, for the bells had ceased ringing nearly half an hour ago, and by that time Brombridge was well on in the morning services of its various places of worship ; and at each and all it was noticed that the congregations were unusually large, and that a sort of suppressed excitement was manifest everywhere.

It was a well-known fact that any event that disturbed the laborious and somewhat sordid peace of the ugly town was sure to be improved in the various pulpits the following Sunday, and any preacher who failed so to improve the occasion would have been regarded as somewhat of a religious defaulter or an unfaithful shepherd.

Moreover, it was very seldom that the pulpit was not in the most perfect harmony with the pews on the moral to be drawn from such events ; and, consequently, the good people of Brombridge settled themselves down in their seats on this particular morning with the fixed intention of obtaining a maximum of holy edification from the lately extinguished fire, with a minimum of trouble in so doing.

At the Parish Church of St. Columba it was evident

that the pathos of the young fireman's death was the keynote of the whole service, for the dead man, whose charred remains had been discovered during the overhauling of the debris, had been a member of the Established Church, and had but lately joined the choir.

The organ sent forth the dismal strains of 'The Dead March' at the conclusion of the vicar's ten-minutes sermon on the words from the burial service, 'In the midst of life we are in death'; and the choir sang 'Brief life is here our portion,' instead of the usual closing hymn. It was also announced that the vicar would receive donations to a fund for raising a stone to the dead man's memory, as he had left neither kith nor kin behind him.

In the Congregational Chapel, whose minister was away for his health, the preacher being a 'supply,' nothing notable was said, and only a passing allusion in the prayer to the Divine mercy that had spared the other buildings, and ordained that the life lost should be one that left no widow childless, or orphan destitute. The two reporters on hearing this hurriedly left the building in search of better copy elsewhere. They were, however, somewhat detained by the fainting of one of the Sunday-School teachers who was being carried down from the gallery, doubtless overcome by the heat, the smell of hair-oil, and the blatant peppermint 'lollies' then and there being consumed by the youthful worshippers in the back seats.

In the Unitarian Chapel the main stress of the remarks was laid on the need for proper guarding of hydrants from possibility of tampering, and the Christian obligation of enforcing civic responsibility; also the admonition to Town Councillors was admirable.

But it was in the Ebenezer Chapel of the Baptists, and the humble iron building where the Narrow Way

## SUNDAY MORNING AFTER THE FIRE 11

Pilgrims met, that things were most lively, and promised the most stirring material for headlines for the coming week.

The Narrow Way Pilgrims began by singing 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow,' with a fervour that carried the sound across to Ebenezer, and much irritated the mind of Mr. Bleby the hairdresser, for he remembered that his window was not insured, and the hoofs of the inconsiderate animal who had kicked in his new glass front had caused him a loss of £5, 10s. on the glass, besides the total destruction of various seductive pyramids of perfumes and purifications.

'It isn't neighbourly,' he murmured to himself as he stowed his hat under the seat; 'they might think what this fire has cost me.'

But the greatest demonstration of exhilaration was when the most stentorian of the Pilgrims was seen to rise from the circle on the little platform and drink a copious draught of water by way of preparing for the solemn duty that lay before him.

Pilgrim Gedge had read with great impressiveness the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Amens of the scattered faithful sounded uncommonly like cheering now and then. But it remained for Pilgrim Blodger to drive conviction home to the souls of the listeners (and their nerves also).

He stated with great unction that for seventy years a bottomless pit had been yawning in Brombridge, and had swallowed up the lost souls of countless men, women, and children; also that for the same time the Devil had been let loose in the town, luring young men and women to go to Sellcuts' Music Hall, knowing that the moment they took that short cut to hell they were his for ever and ever.

He also stated of personal knowledge, though he was careful to abstain from saying how it had been obtained, that no woman or girl who could dance or act in public could be a chaste woman, and he wasn't quite sure that those who did so even in private were fit to be the wives and daughters of Pilgrims (at which good Mrs. Cox, who weighed over eighteen stone, shouted 'Hear, hear!' in a shrill and feeble voice). He said, furthermore, that all the men connected with the stage were wicked profligates, roaming about like roaring lions seeking whom they might devour.

At the close of a really eloquent peroration he remarked in a casual manner, that it did not much matter if the unpredestined went to such places, they were doomed to endless burning anyhow; but that salvation was of the Narrow Way Pilgrims, and the few elect of other strict communions, and it behoved them to touch not, taste not, handle not the unclean thing. It was also manifestly on behalf of these that Divine justice had at last interposed and declared itself in the total destruction of Sellcuts' but a few hours before, and as he uttered the words 'So perish all thine enemies, O Lord,' the listeners burst into a perfect furore of Hallelujahs and Praise Gods.

They then shook hands with each other, and laughed with pious mirth at the discomfiture of the hosts of Satan.

Finally they marched out in a body, and, not without some hustling for the best places, arranged themselves on the pavement in the street, in front of the doctor's house, and began to hold a Praise-and-Thanks-giving meeting in sight of the still smoking ruins of Sellcuts' and the front windows of the Green Grapes.

They had not proceeded far, however, when the door of the public-house opened, and a well-dressed man

## SUNDAY MORNING AFTER THE FIRE 13

came with quick, strong steps across to Pilgrim Blodger.

'You must please stop that, my friend,' he said. 'The poor wife yonder lies dying of the shock of the fire, with her new-born baby dead beside her. Have you no pity for these in their hour of calamity?'

'Go on, Pilgrim Blodger!' cried a shrill female voice like to that of Mrs. Cox,—'it's a wile of Satan to stop our testimony. Go on! Don't mind him.'

But Pilgrim Blodger had common sense, even if he had not too much humanity, and, catching sight of the Chief Constable on the other side of the street, he felt that that great man's eye was upon him, also that it was getting near dinner-time, and his wife, who was not a Narrow Way Pilgrim, had a nasty way of making things very unpleasant for him if he were late at the mid-day meal. So with an air of benign resignation he murmured, 'Of course the dying must be considered, and if this miserable soul is about to appear before her Maker, I will go in and pray with her ere it be too late.'

'Better go and pray for yourselves,' said the stranger, 'you need it far more than she does'; and he turned back to the public-house, leaving a somewhat ruffled Christian on the pavement.

'That's the manager of Sellcuts,' said Mrs. Cox in his ear, 'I thought as you didn't know who it was a-cutting short your testimony in that way.'

Meanwhile there had been an unprecedented crowd in Ebenezer, for the new pastor was not only by far the best preacher in that part of the country, he was also, it was whispered, not quite sound! In fact, Miss Mimsey, who took children of earnest Christians on advantageous terms as per advertisement, had gone

home pale with religious anger the first Sunday of his instalment, for he had said that religion did not consist in what we believe, but in what we are. 'It is Jesuitical teaching!' cried the poor lady. 'And I don't think I dare retain my seat beyond this term. But as our sittings are paid for in advance we shall have to attend up to Christmas.'

The pick of reporters from adjacent towns, and some of the officers and men of the Royal Brombridge Rangers, were there, besides many of the Town Council; also the Mayor, who was a constant worshipper, but regarded with a slight mistrust as being occasionally 'in liquor' on week-days.

Dr. Slaney, who professed nothing, but went sometimes to the Carmelite Church, came in late, and sat in a quiet corner under the gallery.

There had been one of those sudden stillnesses that fall on large gatherings of people when a point of tension has been mutely realised and not a cough nor a rustle dares to break the undefined spell of something acute, when in the prayer before the sermon the pastor had prayed with passionate fervour, 'that we may rise from the graves of our cherished prejudices, and spring into the life and freedom of the Brotherhood of Christ Jesus.'

But when, instead of giving out a text in the usual way, he gravely and in simple words stated the catastrophe of the fire, the death of the fireman—'faithful unto death,'—the heroic rescue of a wife by her husband—'it is better to save life than to kill,'—and the gratitude that ought to be in every heart for officials who did their duty in the face of danger and difficulty, there was a distinct rustle in all parts of the chapel as of those who had checked a movement to clap.

'I am one of those,' said the preacher, 'who have

## SUNDAY MORNING AFTER THE FIRE 15

been brought up to regard all amusements as outside the sympathy of God and the influence of religion, and to look upon such amusements as belong to the stage, dancing, acting, gay music, and so forth, as only snares set by the agents of the Evil One to entrap the souls of men into eternal bondage. It never occurred to me until lately, that amusement, laughter, happy bodily action, and charming spectacles have their place in the economy of God, as certainly as work, study, worship, and sorrow.

'But long ago I realised in a near and dear relation of my mother's that an actress may be as chaste a woman as the best wife of the best of us ; and I am beginning to think that a manager of a music hall may have aspirations towards bringing beauty, cleanliness, and joy of life to the masses of the people, as certainly as the pastor of a church, or some wealthy, religious philanthropist.

'To be sure there are places of amusement that are a disgrace to our civilisation, let alone our Christianity, and it is from these only that many have drawn their conclusions about the character of all. But I ask you whether it is fair to class all philanthropists as humbugs, because one or two have proved to be so ; or to say that all ministers are hypocrites, because one of those in this town was convicted of a dreadful crime ?

'If the place of amusement is morally foul it must be cleansed ; but we shall not do this by standing aloof from all amusement, and condemning wholesale those who cater for it.'

There was a little shuffling in one of the pews at this juncture, and the Misses Mimsey were seen to go out in Indian file, with much wagging of their Sabbath bonnets when they got to the door.

'I call it simply indecent,' said Miss Amber Mimsey who sat up many tedious nights to blacken out with the thickest of ink the unrespectable words that might be found in *All's Well That Ends Well*, during preparation for the Cambridge Local.

'He's very courageous, I think,' bleated Miss Pansy Mimsey, who found life very dull, especially during the holidays, and secretly sighed for some wild event to break its monotony.

But the preacher went on in spite of the interruption, and no one else left the church till closing time.

'The music hall and the theatre provide for no felt want of mine,' he cried, 'but if they do for those of other people, who am I that I should bind every taste in the world down to the limits of my own.'

'We pray for the kingdom of God to come and for His will to be done; I say unto you, that kingdom of love and purity, of grace and beauty, has got to come in the theatre and the music hall as certainly as it has got to come in the heart of every human being. There is no tabooed spot in the sight of God, no ostracised class in the whole range of His vision; wherefore, let us, in the name of His eternal love, do away with our miserable taboos, and banish our ostracisms, for then only shall we get near enough to each other in the twilight of the climbing road to hear that the hearts of all, so far from "beating funeral marches to the grave," are pulsing in time to the heart-beats of the Heavenly Father Himself.'

Long after Ebenezer had emptied itself, the deacon who had first invited Mr. Paine to come to Brombridge knocked gently at his study door, and entered with hesitating step.

'I suppose you know what to expect after such a declaration as that of this morning?' he said, looking

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down on the faded carpet and turning the door-handle nervously as he spoke.

'Ah, indeed yes,' replied the minister cheerfully. 'I shouldn't wonder if they don't some of them want the pulpit fumigated when I go.'

'You take it lightly, Mr. Paine,' said the deacon, somewhat relieved, for in his heart he loved his minister, and was pretty much of his way of thinking.

'Well, it isn't a very heavy matter after all,' said the young man, 'all places are narrow on some questions, and Ebenezer will grow on the matter of public amusement. And you know there has been good cause for their horror of the stage both here and in other places. It is not often, I am afraid, that one meets with such a good man as Mr. Blake as manager of a music hall, or such a woman as the one I had in my mind when I was preaching—a relation of my mother's—whose soul was as snow-white as that of my own dear little wife.'

'Shall you send in your resignation if they ask you to?' asked the old deacon with a tremor in his voice.

'That depends on who "they" are,' replied the minister.

'It'll be Mr. Bleby for certain, and the oldest Miss Mimsey.'

The two men looked one at the other, and both laughed a laugh in which there was no malice.

'We'll think about it when they do,' said the minister.

## CHAPTER III

### IN TWO HOUSEHOLDS

AT the bay-window of the breakfast-room in Brombridge Hall, on that same Sunday morning, stood a young girl of about nineteen, gazing out on the weather with a discontent that was not at all divine.

‘What a horrid day!’ she was saying to herself. ‘I wonder why it always rains after big fires! How curious it seems not to see the dome and the gilt figure as one looks down over the old place.’

Mora Uraine was not what is called a pretty girl, but this was in part due to the very unbecoming style of her clothing, and the way in which her dark hair was arranged. The latter appeared to be brushed down as flat as possible, and strained into a tight, hard knot at the back of her shapely head. Her complexion being pale, with a tint of olive in it, did not lend itself to the cold, washed-out brown of her somewhat skimpy dress. Her features were regular, and her nose a delicate aquiline, but there was a suspicion of want of self-control in the extreme mobility of her face. Her great charm, however, lay in the wonderful eyes which appeared to take their colour from every passing mood. At one time they would seem so dark as to come almost within the category of ‘black.’ At another they would

be so bright and light, a mixture of gold and brown, as to warrant one in calling them hazel. Her hands were well shaped, and her nails might have been perfect; but there was a want of dainty care and finish about the whole of her person that compelled the critical onlooker to do her full justice by summing her up as a 'coming' rather than a 'come' woman.

'Hullo, Pussy!' said a cheery voice behind her, 'and how are you after all the sitting up and the excitement?'

'Ah, father dear, why did you go off without me? To think of you and Ted having such a splendid view of it all, and I only able to see it properly when the wind blew the branches to one side!'

'Well, you know, I would have taken you willingly enough, but your mother was afraid it would not sound proper; and I didn't want a row,' replied her father.

'Father, don't you think it's very hard that mother never likes me to do the things I want to do, and the things she wants me to do, I don't often like doing?' said Mora with a little pout, as she took her place at the coffee-urn.

'It's the general cussedness of being a girl,' chimed in Ted, who came in at that moment; 'anyhow, I'm glad father and I went, and we'll tell you all about it if you are good.'

It was easy to recognise the relationship of these three, as they sat at the round table, discussing the burning of *Sellcuts'*, and diminishing the bread and butter before them, if only from the remarkable resemblance of their voices.

The Colonel was a man of middle height, fat, fair, and well built, and a most good-natured person to live with; and Ted, his seventeen-year-old son, was his very image.

Both had blue eyes—honest, kindly, and true ; both had comfortable chins, not aggressively square, with a dimple in the middle ; and both had rather small compact heads, well set on square, strong shoulders.

In disposition they were absolutely alike, and in pure, simple, transparent easy-goingness it would have been hard to beat either of them.

The Colonel was devoted to his dogmatic and highly-strung wife ; but it was largely due to the unvarying sweetness of his temper, and not her excellences, that their married life had been one of unbroken content on his part.

Now and then when the vials of her wrath had been emptied over his devoted head, for some sin of omission, or parental laxity of his on Mora or Ted's behalf, his blue eyes would grow a little smaller, and he would remark in a low tone, 'Well, I don't think you need make such a deuce of a fuss about it,' and leave the room with a somewhat emphasised shut of the door. A most salutary proceeding on his part, as it had taught his wife during the twenty-four years of their married life to couch her remonstrances in civil and reasonable language if the culprit was to remain within hearing of them ; whereas if sharpness drove him away, he lost the inestimable benefits of her admonition.

Mrs. Uraine never came down to breakfast, out of deference to the gentle invalidism in which she had wrapped her life during the past three years ; but she dominated that meal, as she did everything else in her household, as completely in her absence as if she were present.

It was one of her numerous fads, that anything outside of bread-and-butter and coffee at breakfast was not only wholly unnecessary, but absolutely injurious to the moral and physical welfare of the community.

So morning after morning her husband, son, daughter, and any visitors that chanced to be stopping in the house, loyally and uncomplainingly bowed to her authority ; and while longing in secret for the forbidden joys of sausage, bacon and eggs, or fried fish, ate the orthodox but somewhat uninteresting slices prepared for them in the pantry, and made the best of it.

The kitchen, however, secretly nourished its own views on the autocracy of the breakfast-table, and now and again an odour contraband, but delicious, would find its way over the house, and arouse the militance of the invalid.

'Where does that smell come from ?' she would ask of the maid who answered the energetic ringing of her bell.

'I don't know, ma'am,' would be the audacious reply, 'unless it comes from the Knoll.'

'Ah, it's those low music-hall people !' the invalid would remark with a sigh. 'Well, shut all the windows, Parker. I'm not going to have our house poisoned by their vulgar extravagance.'

During breakfast nothing else was talked of but the fire, and when the delay in fixing the standpipe was commented upon, Mora's eyes grew light and bright with sudden anger.

'Oh, I do hope whoever did that will be hanged !' she cried. But when the Colonel described the scene on the parapet, and the rescue of the acrobat and Mrs. Blake, her eyes grew darker and darker, till the tears welled up and fell over her cheeks into her cup.

'That manager's a hero,' said Ted with conviction, 'and he deserves the Victoria Cross for a deed like that, and I don't care who says he doesn't !'

'But what about the fireman who died to save a woman who wasn't his wife ?' cried Mora. 'I think his was the greater deed of the two.'

The Colonel looked up quickly, as if about to say something, but checked himself, and took another piece of bread-and-butter instead.

'The Dad met Mr. Blake,' continued Ted, 'only the day before yesterday ; didn't you, Dad ? And you said he was a very nice man, and quite a gentleman, didn't you ?'

'Yes, I did, my boy, but your mother did not like it, so you had better not mention anything about it before her,' and the good-humoured Colonel wriggled a little as he spoke.

'Mother thinks they're all bad alike,' rejoined Mora thoughtfully. 'I wonder if she has ever met or spoken to any one belonging to the stage ?'

'Oh dear, no !' replied Mora's father, 'your mother has never in her life been thrown with people of that sort ; she only judges by what she has heard, and that's quite enough for her.'

Mora gave him a quick, searching look to see if by any chance there was a streak of hitherto unsuspected irony in his mind, but he, unwitting of her scrutiny, stirred his coffee, and drained the cup to the last drop in all good faith.

He had never dreamed of asking his wife for the reason of the faith that was in her, he would not do so now, and, in consequence, there was a strange semi-hostile, half-conscious process going on in his daughter's mind, of which, in spite of the closest affection, he was absolutely ignorant.

When breakfast had been cleared away, Mora sprang upstairs with a light step to get off to her own beloved den in the turret. But just as she was passing her mother's bedroom door she heard her calling in the tone that indicated unusual urgency ; so with a sudden pang of disappointment she gently pushed open the

door and went into the cheerful room where most of her mother's days were spent.

'I want you and Ted to go to church this morning,' said Mrs. Uraine, returning the filial kiss with unusual heartiness. 'Mr. Carmichael is sure to have something to say about the fire, and I want you to bring me word of what he says. Also I want you on your way there to call at Dr. Slaney's and ask him to come and see me during the course of the day. He's sure to know a good deal about things, and, being Sunday, he won't have so many other people to see.'

'Yes, mother,' said Mora dutifully, though in her heart she thought Dr. Slaney might have been let off calling on Sunday; also she hated going to church on wet days, and having to pick her way along a muddy road, and find a corner in the comfortless pew for a dripping umbrella.

Likewise she had planned a poem of tragic and thrilling quality that was to embody some of the incidents of the fire, but more especially her feelings on the matter. 'For,' as she remarked to the docile Ted on the way to church, 'feelings seem to lie heavier and heavier on your chest the longer you have to keep them there.'

For a wonder the Colonel accompanied them, impelled to this unusual act by a secret craving to learn something more about the mysterious presence of the manager's wife in the music hall the night before.

'Such a beautiful creature,' he said to himself, 'how came she there at that time of night? And that acrobatic girl too! I wonder if they set the place on fire?' As he sat in the chilly ugly church he revolved these things slowly round and round in his brain, till a conviction began to stir within him that it was his duty to sift the matter on his own account.

Being one of the borough magistrates, he had been instrumental in granting the licence to Sellcuts' and in confirming the manager's choice of the man at the Green Grapes, therefore he had more than a common interest in the investigation of the circumstances that had led to the burning down of the old place.

Of course there would be a Coroner's Inquest on the death of the fireman, of which lamentable occurrence news had been brought to his house by the milkman early that morning, and there would be some light thrown on the matter during the cross-examination of witnesses. But supposing the Inquest should reveal that by intention and not by accident Sellcuts' had been set fire to, on whom would the guilt rest of so daring and reckless a crime?

To be sure that part of it had been settled by his wife, with her usual celerity of judgment. 'You may be quite sure,' she remarked with cheerful calmness, 'that that wretched creature the manager has done the whole thing. They are all alike, and capable of any wickedness. I remember when our barns were set fire to, it was proved that the man had been at some low theatre the night before.'

The Colonel suggested that this might perhaps be true; but there did not seem a sufficiently strong motive for such a deed on the part of the man who had spent so much money on a music hall, and insured it for so much less than its value.

But Mrs. Uraine had screwed her mouth to one side, and, with a sarcastic 'm-hm,' had concluded the matter by saying, 'He doubtless knows best why he did it, and I shall always have my own opinion about that man.'

Now, while the Colonel was pondering these things in the corner of his large pew, the manager of Sellcuts'

was conducting a searching inquiry into a part of them in his own well-furnished library at the Knoll.

He was standing on the rug, his hands in his pockets, and his feet somewhat apart, as befits the attitude of a determined man.

Opposite him, with her arm resting on the corner of the mantelshelf, stood his wife, superbly dressed, but showing sundry signs in face and manner of the terrible episode through which she had so recently passed, also of the drinking bout of the night before. On her dazzlingly white skin, just below the left temple, there was one red spot, which a cinder had made as it skimmed over her, and died out in the velvet dress she was wearing ; and her hair smelt of the fire.

Her strange, cold eyes looked heavy and troubled ; and the small white—very white—hand that went up to her exquisite hair now and then, was damp and trembling.

‘ You must tell me how you came to leave this house, in the first place,’ the manager was saying in a low, firm voice. ‘ You promised me on your honour the last time, when I said I’d send you to a Home, that you would not go beyond the grounds without me. And in spite of that, when I came home from Kingsboro’ this morning, you were nowhere to be found, and then I was told you had left the house after dinner.’

‘ I wanted to have some fun,’ she replied vacantly.

‘ Who asked you to go ? ’ he said quietly.

‘ Ah, that’s telling,’ she responded with a foolish laugh, and the same sly look of a hunted animal that had so scared Dr. Slaney.

‘ Yes, it is telling,’ continued her husband ; and he added under his breath, ‘ and I intend you shall tell me, whatever happens. Come,’ he said, ‘ you’d better tell me, or it will be bad for you.’

'Green Gooseberry sent me a note, Lardy brought it, and Miss L'Estrange came in a carriage for me,' she whispered, watching him stealthily from under the aureole of red and gold.

'Was Lardy Dukelle with you all the time?' he asked quietly, as if it was a mere commonplace.

'No, not all the time.'

'How came you up in the room where the lamps are kept?' asked Mr. Blake, not daring to break the current of her feeble memory by making her sit down, though he saw with pity and apprehension how she was beginning to tremble, as indicated by the fluttering of her drapery. 'Father made me go,' she whispered.

Then a sudden change came over the poor beautiful creature, and with a great cry she went down on her knees, and fell face downward at his feet, moaning to him not to be angry with her, not to punish her by sending her away, but to forgive her this once!

But before he had time to lift her up, and fold her to his breast, assuring her that he loved her, and would keep her close to him always, as he had done so many times before, she had lost the last vestige of the unusual mental control that had enabled her to answer all his questions up to this moment, and began a series of shrieks and yells that speedily brought the servants to the help of their master.

'It's shock,' he said briefly to the groom.

'It's drink,' said the latter to the cook, 'and I should say she's going in for the jimjams.' This was after they had got her to bed, and she was quieting down in charge of her maid, under the influence of an opiate given to her by her husband.

'Well, of all the patient gentlemen as ever I see in my life,' cried the cook, 'I've never seen one to come up to him! Why, in the last place where I was at, if

the missis was out when the master wanted her in, or not on time, he'd lamb into her with anythink that come handy,—the hearth-brush, or the Bible, his boots, and even the ink-bottle. It's a pity there ain't some one to teach Mrs. B. what she's got to be thankful for. Husbands like him aren't picked up every day.'

'I'm going down to town to inquire for Mrs. Ferrel,' said the manager to his groom; 'lock all the outer doors, and keep the keys carefully; and if Mrs. Blake has another attack, send cook for Dr. Slaney. I don't believe I've got the true story from her yet,' he said to himself as he walked briskly down the drive, 'they put her up to some lie, I can see by her face. She'll let it out before long, that's one comfort. Poor little Maggie!'

Thus it was that the Narrow Way Pilgrims were cut short in their open-air testimony against what remained of Sellcuts'.

And here it may not be out of place to take a brief backward glance at one or two of the incidents connected with the coming of Mr. Paul Diggory Blake to Brombridge, as manager and owner of Sellcuts' Music Hall.

Where he got his money from, no one seemed to know; but that he had plenty was evident by the expensive way in which he had repaired and decorated the tawdry old theatre. He had been a popular actor, but that was not sufficient ground for accounting for his purchase of the Knoll and his liberality in other matters.

Mrs. Uraine had dismissed the difficulty in her own peculiar fashion. 'You may be sure he's made it on the turf,' she said to Dr. Slaney. 'They're all gamblers.'

But it must be confessed there was considerable surprise at his readiness to rent the property known as

Sellcuts' estate, both on the part of the aristocratic owner, and also on that of the great brewing firm who rented the Green Grapes from the former.

'It has a very bad reputation,' said Lord Clancbinder to his agent. 'And I hear on all sides that Blake's been such a steady fellow. 'Pon my soul, I can't make it out.'

'Neither can I,' returned the other. 'But I've made sure that the money is all right. Whether he finds it a losing game or no, your money is quite safe. I assured myself of that before recommending your lordship to part with the lease.'

'What people can find to like in shows of this sort, I can't for the life of me see,' continued Lord Clancbinder; 'but they like them, and some one has to do the providing, and it's no business of mine. I should become insane if I had to watch a painted Jezebel pirouetting night after night, and kicking up her heels where her head ought to be, and leering and ogling a lot of half-boozy scallawags. But if others like it—well—as I said before, it's no business of mine, so long as the money comes in all right.'

The eminent brewing firm of Virtue, Liberty, and Virtue had meanwhile discussed the question of putting in a man of Mr. Blake's choosing as manager of the Green Grapes, as part of the agreement, whereby the said Paul Diggory Blake was to rent the premises over the stables for the use of dressing and other rooms necessary for the good conduct of Sellcuts'.

'We've not been very fortunate with the last three,' said Mr. Virtue, senior, 'and after that affair of the stabbing in the Cut, the police are likely to keep a watchful eye on the Saturday night business. Blake knows what he's about, and I should say his man had better have a chance.'

'I don't know if you have noticed a paragraph in the deed he's had drawn up,' said the clerk. 'It may strike you as calling for deletion *in toto*, or very considerable modification.'

The young man hunted with his finger up and down first one sheet and then the other of the somewhat lengthy document, until he found it.

'Oh, here it is! These are the words to which I refer: "Provided that the passage known as the Cut, leading from the premises of the Green Grapes into Hadding Lane, shall be totally severed from all such connection, and the entrance bricked up with solid masonry."

'Now I ask you, sir,' continued the clerk, 'what is the meaning of that?'

Mr. Virtue sat a while in silence; then he said half to himself and half to his clerk, 'Who's been putting him up to it? That's what I'd like to know. Why, the shutting up of that exit will militate against the—the—safety of the public in case of fire. Eh, Mr. Smith?'

'Of course it will, sir,' cried Mr. Smith, fixing an eye of deferential admiration on his employer; 'I should have it crossed off if I were you, sir. It'll be most inconvenient on Sundays, especially, to have just the one exit into the main thoroughfare, in sight of the whole town.'

'The Hadding Lane people will find it very inconvenient sending the children all that way round for the beer in wet weather,' said Mr. Virtue, shaking his head.

In his mind he was revolving the question of the three houses between the Bank and the Bakery, whose inhabitants required so much thirst-slaking at hours outside of those prescribed as the legal time of drouth by the law.

'It can't be done, Mr. Smith,' said Mr. Virtue cheerfully. 'I will write a friendly note to Mr. Blake, and tell him we will cordially meet his views in everything else, even to accepting his man as manager of the Green Grapes; but that the passage in question is a matter of vital importance to the prosperity of the business, owing to its easy exit into Hadding Lane.'

'Pardon me, sir,' said the clerk apologetically, 'I would suggest, if I may, that you do not use the words "*exit into* Hadding Lane," but substitute "*owing to* its affording convenient access *from* Hadding Lane to the Green Grapes." There's a distinction with a difference, sir,' added the clerk meaningly.

'Ah, yes! Just so, of course,' replied the head of the firm. 'That is certainly a neater way of stating the case.'

Divining from the excessive courtesy of the note from Virtue, Liberty, and Virtue, that the closing up of the passage was not to be looked for at their hands, Mr. Blake quietly signed the agreement, from which that one clause had been deleted; and Samuel Virtue imagined he had successfully hoodwinked the astute new manager of Sellcuts' as to the true inwardness of the Cut into Hadding Lane.

'You'll have to have eyes in the back of your head, Mr. Ferrel,' Mr. Blake remarked when engaging the new publican. 'You'll please to keep within the law, and the Chief Constable will back you up against the whole lot of them.'

By the 'lot,' he meant the Mayor and the Town Council, all of whom were for some reason or other more or less unwilling to interfere with the successful lawbreaking that had been going on under their very eyes.

In the secrecy of his silent thoughts Mr. Blake was

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remarking to himself that the Cut would sooner or later be cut off from the Green Grapes by its own crying delinquencies, and that it was only a mere question of time.

And he was right, as the Coroner's Inquest proved up to the hilt.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE INQUEST

As a rule the Inquests were held in the upper room of the Green Grapes, that being, if not the most respectable, at least the best-appointed licensed place in Brombridge.

Again and again had that very small and unpopular, but well-meaning body 'The Teetotal Warriors' sent in resolutions to the Town Council, exhorting them to hold the Inquests elsewhere ; and again and again had Mr. Virtue, senior, moved that the matter be laid on the table, and had carried his point by a majority of all the rest but one, that one being Mr. Bleby, who was known to oppose everything that Mr. Virtue supported, not from right principle, but from bad temper.

Owing, however, to the ravages of the fire, the Inquest was convened in the dancing-saloon of the Goat and Fold, and great were the hardships thereby entailed ; and eloquent, and for once unanimous, were the Brombridge papers in calling for a prompt ending to such a scandalous state of things.

To begin with, the only ventilation was in the glazed roof, or through the wide door which opened into a straight passage, leading into the street, and looking east. The wind being in that quarter on the day of

the Inquest, and somewhat boisterously so, there was every now and then an agonised shout from the foreman of the jury, 'Shut that door, will you?' Then, as the rain was falling in torrents, the wretched skylight had to be closed, to prevent those who sat beneath it from being soaked to the skin.

As the hours wore on, the air of the place became such that two of the jurymen complained of illness, and had to have brandy brought them; and one of the witnesses fainted outright. And this was hardly to be wondered at, for the odour of the stables, and that of the adjacent brewery, blending frankly with the unquiet smells of the public-house kitchen, got blown about by the wind over the neighbouring dust-holes, and found their way into the dancing-saloon, where rain-soaked clothes, stale tobacco-smoke, beer, and dust completed the noisome *tout ensemble*.

From the first it was evident that there was a strong conviction in the minds of some that the fire had begun in one of the dressing-rooms over the stable, and that it was not the result of an accident.

The first witnesses deposed to the finding of the dead man's charred body on the debris of the wall of the corner house, down through which he had safely passed with the girl acrobat, who had been taken off then and there to the county hospital.

It appeared evident from the testimony of two other firemen, that he had gone back to the burning parapet to get something for the poor girl—something she had dropped in the attic, and wanted very badly—and that it was found tightly clasped in the hand that was not burned, by those who discovered his body.

The 'something' was produced, and handed to the coroner, who scanned it carefully in silence, and passed

it to the foreman of the jury, with a request for its prompt return.

Next came the examination of the House Physician of the hospital, as to the reception and condition of the burnt acrobat.

His evidence was listened to with close attention, for the acrobat was rapidly sinking, and her depositions had been taken. Her heart was failing, said the doctor, not from the severity of her injuries, as they were quite superficial, but from the shock and fright, coming after the severe physical strain of the performance on the slack wire.

Her story was simple enough. She had come down with the others, Mr. Dukelle, Miss L'Estrange, and Miss Colani, by the 5 P.M. train from London. She had sent a letter by the first-named to Mrs. Blake, to come and see her after her turn was over, as they had been friends before Mrs. Blake was married. They had a supper in the dressing-room, the one set apart for lady acrobats, where the Dukelles had joined them. They knew they were breaking the rules in letting gentlemen be in that room, but as she—Green Gooseberry—had become Mrs. Lardy Dukelle only that morning, they hoped Mr. Blake would overlook it if he got to hear of it.

He fined his employees if they broke the rules, and sometimes dismissed them on the spot. Neither of the Dukelles were performing that night; they had only come down for a spree. Lardy got very noisy, as they had a lot of drink, for which Mrs. Blake had paid, and he and his father had chased them up the stairs into the lamp room. They were locked in. Mrs. Blake cried a good deal, and said Mr. Blake would send her away to a Home. Lardy forgot to come back and let them out as he promised, and then the fire burst in. Mrs. Blake cried again, and said it

would serve her right if she were burnt to death, as Mr. Blake had been so kind to her, and she had given him so much trouble.

Mr. Dukelle and Lardy didn't live anywhere in particular, they changed about so ; but letters addressed to the Camelot Theatre, Castle Street, London, would always find them.

'The paper found in the dead man's hand is the marriage certificate of this poor girl,' said the coroner.

There was what is called a sensation in the closely packed room ; and many craned their necks to get a good look at the manager, to see how he bore the account of his wife's conduct and his brother-in-law's marriage.

But, except that he was pale, and sat looking fixedly at the telegram which had just been passed to him, he made no sign, and his brown moustache hid his lips too well for any quiver that disturbed them to be visible to the onlooker.

His turn came at last, and so long and minute was the cross-examination to which he was subjected, that an interval for lunch only found him half-way through his ordeal.

'He bears it wonderfully well,' thought the coroner, as he interposed now and then between the manager and the leader of the Narrow Way Pilgrims, who seemed strangely anxious to get some admission from the witness that would discredit him in the eyes of the rest.

Paul Blake was more than a match for the Pilgrim, and when the latter had asked the question as to why *Sellcuts'* was insured for so much less than its actual value, there was a slight rasp in Mr. Blake's voice, and the faintest shadow of a smile on his comely face, as he replied, 'Because the Insurance Company refused to

insure it for a bigger sum, owing to its close proximity to five different public-houses.'

He also put in a certificate from Dr. Slaney as to the danger to Mrs. Blake, owing to her mental condition, of exposing her to the excitement and misery of appearing and giving evidence as to her own folly.

The coroner accepted the certificate, complimented Mr. Blake on the courtesy and minuteness with which he had given his evidence, and then called on Mr. George Ferrel, the new manager of the Green Grapes.

He, poor fellow, broke down utterly once or twice, for his young wife and first child lay dead in the room from which he had seen the outbreak of the fire that had left him a lonely man.

Even Pilgrim Blodger was moved, and wiped his bald head in a nervous way with his striped handkerchief, to hide the feelings prejudice could not wholly kill.

It was very evident from the publican's story that the fire began in one of the rooms over the stable, and he mentioned the overwhelming smell of paraffin as having compelled him to get out of bed and see where it came from.

He had searched all his premises most carefully, and had come back to the bedroom to calm his wife's fears, when, beside the drawn blind, he caught sight of a glimmer, and, pulling it up, saw flames bursting from the window over the stables nearest the music hall. No, he was positive that the fire did not originate in the stables, because he rushed down immediately to rouse the stablemen, and the horses were quiet, which they would not have been if there had been fire within sight of them. The men were quite sober. In fact, two of them were teetotalers, and the one who was not lived away from the premises, and had to be fetched.

Then came the Chief Constable, and after him the captain of the fire brigade, and a long examination as to the tampering with the hydrant, and the consequent delay in procuring water.

After these came the evidence of Dr. Slaney, and his casual mention of seeing the man and two women hurrying off to the station ; and finally the caretaker, who confessed that he had left the locking-up to Mr. Blake's father-in-law that night.

'It is quite evident that these Dukelles and the two ladies are very important witnesses,' the coroner remarked at length, 'and I shall adjourn this inquiry in order that they may be subpœnaed to attend.'

At that moment Mr. Blake rose to his feet, and asked permission to make an important statement. On this being granted, the manager read out the following telegram :—

'What's up? Dukelle disappeared. Landlady says gone to America. Don't believe it. Has leading part in first appearance of Mephistopheles to-night. Can you illuminate? Simpson, Camelot.'

'This has come while I have been sitting here,' said Mr. Blake, 'and as the two are so closely connected with myself, I think it is only right to place this telegram in your hands.'

So the Inquest was adjourned, and the bar of the Goat and Fold did a roaring trade in hot drinks that day. Meanwhile amongst the thirsty ones there was a general consensus of opinion that the next sitting of the coroner would make things hot for somebody.

That evening Mr. Blake dressed himself with even more than ordinary care, in order to honour the anniversary of his marriage, by wearing at dinner the clothes he had worn on that eventful day a year ago.

At his request his wife also had arrayed herself in her bridal dress, and the emerald and opal set he had given her.

While he was waiting for her in the drawing-room, and the sound of the dinner-gong was still vibrating on the air, he heard a ring at the front entrance, and then a young voice parleying with the man who opened the door.

'Miss Mora Uraine,' announced the latter; and in a moment he found himself standing face to face with the only daughter of his next-door neighbour.

'I am so sorry to trouble you,' she began hurriedly, and there was a threat of tears in her voice, 'but my cousin sent me a very lovely white Persian kitten this afternoon, and it has escaped into your fowl-yard, and if your dog sets on to her she'll be killed, and if she gets at the fowls they'll be killed.'

At that moment the door was flung wide, and Mrs. Blake came in, a perfect dream of beauty.

'Maggie, my darling!' cried the husband, while Mora, turning to look at the new-comer, caught her breath, and fairly gasped with wonder and admiration.

It did not in the least surprise her that Mr. Blake put his arms round his beautiful wife and kissed her tenderly on cheek and mouth, but it gave her a new, strange pain, the first of its kind, and a sudden feeling of being lonely, such as she had never before experienced.

'Maggie, this is Miss Uraine,' said Mr. Blake, laying his hand on his wife's wrist, a gesture with which the onlooker was to become very familiar in days to come.

Mora immediately held out her hand, and, being a warm-hearted and kindly young person, the glow of awakened feeling in her heart found its way to her face,

and especially her eyes, and suffused the latter with a most becoming light.

Mrs. Blake took her hand in a hesitating way, and then, with rapidly dilating pupils, said, 'She is pretty and nice; please let her stay with me, Paul.'

Mr. Blake placed his wife on the sofa, and, bending over her, said, 'Will you be very kind to Miss Uraine, dear, while I go and look for her kitten?' and as Mora looked on the charming picture of red-gold hair, dazzling white skin, white satin and lace robe, the bright green gems, and the dark green of the palm that cast feathery shadows down on the blue silk cushions, she began to think within herself that these 'low music-hall people,' as her mother called them, had some elements of beauty and taste in their surroundings that were quite unknown at her home, Brombridge Hall.

Left to themselves, the two girls—for such they both were—began to make friends in the usual girlish way. Mora admired Maggie's beautiful bracelet, and Maggie, in her shy, half-scared way, asked about the kitten.

Mora had heard many unpleasant stories about Mrs. Blake, and that she drank; but sitting there beside her on the sofa it seemed difficult to believe them, and she made up her mind that, whether they were true or false, she would like to be very kind to this gentle young lady beside whom she was sitting in the most superb room she had ever seen in her life. And Mr. Blake too! How handsome he looked in his wedding coat, with that white gardenia in his button-hole, so much better dressed than her father, and so much better mannered than Harry Margetson.

Meanwhile Maggie Blake was getting her slow thoughts into train to make an unusually great effort to express what was in her mind, and, with her strange

cold eyes filling with tears, she laid her hand on Mora's wrist in the fashion her husband did on her own when he wanted her to pay earnest attention to what he was saying, and said in a low pleading voice, 'Don't go away and leave me, I want you to stay with me.'

For a brief moment Mora was silent. There was the unpalatable fact that she had come to the Knoll without her mother's knowledge; there was also the latter's unqualified disapproval of the Blakes for what she called their 'low life'; and in particular there was a remark of hers to the effect that Mrs. Blake was a most dangerous character to have in a neighbourhood. But, on the other hand, her mother had never seen them, and how could she judge, as Mora could, who had seen for herself and been so enchanted with the vision? Also there was her father's verdict that 'Blake' was a very nice fellow; and within herself the difficulty with which young people are confronted who know nothing of the world, and find a new friend so nearly perfect a thing.

Mora's heart settled the question, and when Mr. Blake returned he found his wife and the visitor in each other's arms.

For a moment he stood silent with astonishment—he had never seen his wife show the least affection for any one but himself—and the next he had regained his usual self-possession, and it was with a little shame-facedness that Mora turned round to hear what he was saying.

'We have found your kitten, Miss Uraine; but she is no longer white, as she took refuge in the coal-hole. Won't you stop and take dinner with us, and let my housemaid clean her up with oatmeal? It will take an hour to do.'

'No, thank you,' said Mora, colouring. 'Mother

does not know that I am here. Please let me take her home ; one of our servants will do it.'

'This is the anniversary of our wedding-day,' continued the manager, 'do stay and help us celebrate the event. Let me run in and ask your mother to let you stay.'

'Oh, no, no !' cried Mora. 'If you want me I will write a note to father, and if you will send it in I think he will let me stay.'

Accordingly the following note was placed in the Colonel's hands as he sat nodding over the fire in the lonely library :—

'DEAREST DAD—They've found the kitten, and she's covered all over with coal-dust. May I stop and dine with them while their housemaid cleans Aurora's fur? And please will you come and fetch me your very own self?—Your loving kid, M. F. M. U.'

'There'll be a deuce of a row if your mother gets to hear of it,' said the Colonel to himself; but to his daughter he wrote: 'All right. I'll have to square it with your mother, I suppose. She's asleep now. I'll come for you.'

So Mora stayed and enjoyed her first late dinner with full measure of unqualified satisfaction.

To begin with, it felt so nice to be dining at that hour ; for one of Mrs. Uraine's numerous fads was that it was ruinous to the health and morals to dine late, so the evening meal at Brombridge Hall was at six, and consisted of tea and bread-and-butter, augmented by either jam or cake, or hot toast, but not more than one of those humble dainties at one time, except on the rare occasions of company at the Hall.

Supper was a frugal meal of bread and cheese and beer, with a glass of milk for Mora and Ted, who were

only allowed beer at dinner, and a glass of wine as an extra treat on Sunday.

Mora, being a girl of healthy appetite, found herself in difficulties now and then lest it should seem greedy to enjoy her unaccustomed luxuries in so hearty a fashion, but as both Mr. and Mrs. Blake pressed her to eat, she gradually lost her anxiety and plunged recklessly into the good things submitted to her.

One thing surprised her, and that was that there was neither beer nor wine on the table, and both her host and hostess drank nothing but water, so she did likewise, but made a mental note that Mr. Blake was the first man she had ever seen take only water at dinner.

At dessert she had leisure to notice how beautifully the table was appointed, and involuntarily sighed at the remembrance of the bare simplicity of the one at home.

James now announced that the Colonel had come, so they all adjourned to the drawing-room and had coffee.

Then the prodigal kitten was brought in—clean, and in its right mind, and clothed with a glorious bow of pale blue satin. With an eye to effect, apparently, the snowy thing leapt out of the housemaid's arms on to Mrs. Blake's white satin dress, and made so beautiful a picture in that position, that Colonel Uraine said half in jest to his daughter, 'You ought to hand it over to Mrs. Blake. I'm sure she would take better care of it than you can.'

'You won't take it away to-night, will you?' said Maggie, looking up with frightened eyes, and drawing the kitten to her with trembling hands.

Mora was silent. What should she say to her mother if she inquired for the new arrival, and what to her cousin if she so easily parted with this gift? Also, she had so few treasures of her own that it seemed hard to give up this lovely, precious thing.

But it must be confessed that all through dinner a feeling of compassion for the half-witted wife had been stirring in Mora's heart. She was a girl of considerable penetration as well as kindness, and though she had hitherto lived in a very small world, she had learnt to observe and make deductions that were not often far wrong. She had felt that there was a story in the marriage whose anniversary she was helping to celebrate, and somehow a growing respect and liking for Mr. Blake had taken possession of her almost before she was aware of it.

So her native generosity conquered, and she said in a low tone, 'If you want it so much, you shall have it.'

After a while Mr. Blake called her away to come and look at the aviary, and the Colonel was left to have a quiet chat with Mrs. Blake.

It was rather a difficult matter to tear Mora away from the lovebirds and other tropical beauties; so at last her host took her gently by the arm, saying, 'Come into my room for a moment.'

It was a very cosy room, and smelt strongly of tobacco smoke and russia leather.

They both stood by the writing-table, and Mr. Blake spoke slowly and with suppressed emotion:—

'I cannot thank you in words, Miss Uraine, for your kindness to us to-night. It has been simply priceless. We are so isolated down here, what with my dear wife's inability to play the part of hostess to strangers, and other reasons. One day, when you know us better, I will tell you the story of Maggie's calamity, and then you will have nothing but the tenderest pity for her. But I did not ask you in here to tell you this, but to say that if you will be so kind as to give her this lovely kitten I will get you the counterpart of

it in less than a week. I know you must feel rather badly at parting with it.'

'Oh, let her have it!' cried Mora, 'I don't want to be selfish. I think she is so beautiful and gentle.'

Then, after a little struggle within, she went on rather timidly, 'I don't want mother to know I have given Mrs. Blake my cat, and that's why I want another kitten. She might inquire for this one.'

'Perhaps your mother doesn't approve of us, is that it?' asked Mr. Blake kindly.

'Yes, that's it,' said poor Mora, feeling like a criminal.

'Well, we must win her over,' replied the manager with one of his rare smiles.

For many a day to come Mora was to look back on that interview, and amid its minutest details, so faithfully photographed in loving memory, was to be that radiant, momentary smile.

But its immediate effect was somewhat disconcerting, for in its light she suddenly became conscious that her dress was clumsy and in bad taste, that her hands and nails sadly needed looking after, and that, besides standing and moving very awkwardly, her manners were unpolished and childish.

Meanwhile Mr. Blake had opened a little cabinet, and brought out a red morocco case, which he handed to her, saying, 'There is my mother, Miss Uraine.'

Mora had a sense of humour, and she could not help smiling at the contrast between this presentment of a music-hall manager's mother and her own mother's description of the female belongings of such people, who, according to Mrs. Uraine, were all hopelessly bad, wore false teeth and hair, and painted in private life.

'What a lovely old lady she is!' exclaimed Mora. 'But I think you are something like her.'

'Why that "but"?' said the manager slyly.

'Well, you know she has such snowy hair, and such a fresh complexion, and—'

'You don't think I'm quite so good-looking, is that it?'

'It seems so rude to say so,' said Mora, getting very red, and wishing he would let her get back to the drawing-room before she blundered any worse.

'No, it isn't when I ask you to,' he rejoined. 'I am only teasing you. Now I want you to let me give you a little memento of our anniversary. Will you accept this *Tennyson Birthday Book*? See, I have written your name in it.'

It was a very choicely bound book in blue morocco, and Mora's heart beat with both pleasure and misgiving as she took it in her rather red and cold hand.

On the fly-leaf she saw her name in bold and clear writing—

'To Miss MORA URAINE.

'From MAGGIE and PAUL D. BLAKE.

'There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will.'

Aloud she thanked the giver with real gratitude for the charming memento; but in her inmost soul had begun a conflict between her mother's teachings and her own experience that was to be far-reaching in its consequences, and if coming events cast their shadows before them, the future was certainly casting a shadow on her young face, as she followed Mr. Blake along the corridor, and clutched the book tightly in her pocket, with the determination that, however angry her mother might be at her having accepted it, she would stick to the precious keepsake through thick and thin.

Mrs. Blake and the Colonel had evidently got on well together, for the expression of the former's face

was brighter and happier than usual as she leant back in her chair with a little colour on her pale, marble-cut features.

'Can you play, Miss Uraine?' asked Mr. Blake, opening the dainty satinwood piano in the corner, and drawing out the stool.

'Yes,' said Mora, who had been longing to try the pretty-looking instrument, but had not liked to suggest it.

So in a few moments she was playing her prize piece at Miss Mimsey's—Weber's 'Last Waltz.'

Now Mora had a soul that had few outlets, and she was apt to put an astonishing amount of suppressed emotion into her playing, which was superior to that of most schoolgirl performers. Consequently Mr. Blake was a little taken aback at the fervour with which she played on this occasion.

'You play very well,' he said in his cautious way, 'but that is a very dismal thing. Cannot you give us something more cheerful? I consider that waltz is a waste of energy.'

'Signor Gragi considered it a masterpiece, didn't he?' said the Colonel, with a twinkle in his eye.

But Mora replied in all good faith, being somewhat huffed at Mr. Blake's disparagement of her crack piece, 'Yes, he did. He said whoever could play that could play almost anything.'

'He was a humorist,' replied Mr. Blake kindly. 'But I am sure you can play not only more difficult music than that, but music that would give you infinitely more delight in the learning. Listen to this.' And he sat himself down on the stool from which Mora had risen, and played the 'Bees' Wedding' from Mendelssohn's *Lieder*.

Poor Mora had never heard anything like it before, neither such music nor such performance; and before

she knew what had happened to her the tide of her emotions had completely carried her off her guard, and she stood sobbing helplessly by the piano.

‘Does it make you unhappy?’ asked the player, looking full up into her tear-covered face.

‘No, no! Please go on. Oh, it is like being in heaven, I think, to hear you play.’ So he went on for a bit, ravishing the heart of at least one of his listeners, until the sound of the clock recalled the Colonel to a sense of duty, and he rose to take leave.

‘It has been such a treat,’ he said, and he sighed as he spoke.

‘You will come in whenever you can,’ said the hospitable manager, as he held open the gate for his guests, ‘and I hope my wife and Miss Uraine will become fast friends.’

Fortunately for the delinquents, Mrs. Uraine was sound asleep when they returned, and it was with a profound sense of relief that they wished each other good-night and retired, with the consciousness of having greatly enjoyed themselves in a sort of contraband way.

Instead of going to bed, as she ought to have done, Mora flew off to the solitude of the turret room, and, lighting one of her own private store of candles, sat down to the diligent study of the new birthday book. It was somewhat disappointing, in that there was not enough of anything to satisfy the hunger excited by some of the exquisite verses set apart for separate days; and by and by, becoming impatient of the limitations, she formed the desperate project of going downstairs to the great gloomy drawing-room and getting the gorgeous Tennyson lying in serious isolation on the centre table.

No young burglar unaccustomed to the delicate rôle

of housebreaker could have crept with greater trepidation than did the only daughter of the house as she stole past her mother's door with bare feet and beating heart.

The big drawing-room portal gave a blood-curdling creak as Mora opened it, and a troubled mouse ran hurriedly over her instep in his frantic efforts to escape the light. But these were minor troubles compared with the fear that her mother might hear some sound and call Ted's dog to the rescue.

At last she got safely upstairs again, and then began a diligent search for the lines Mr. Blake had written on the fly-leaf.

Now it must be confessed, with a thousand apologies, that Mora was a perfect heathen in her utter ignorance of all that pertained to the best literature; and it was with the strictest accuracy that her cousin Harry had described her as good material waiting to be made up. Her education at Miss Mimsey's had been on the usual foolish lines of a smatter of accredited subjects, and a careful avoidance of the deeper and higher thought of the greater thinkers.

Consequently she knew no better than to hunt through 'In Memoriam' for Shakespeare's immortal words, and with the result that her eyes ached and her feet grew cold and numb, before it occurred to her that perhaps Mr. Blake would tell her where to look for them. Her toil was not, however, in vain as far as the benefit to herself went, for her attention had been forcibly arrested now and again by some of the musical utterances of the beautiful poem.

She had especially lingered over the stanzas beginning, 'O yet we trust that somehow good,' and committed them to memory for the sake of the last one:—

‘So runs my dream : but what am I ?  
An infant crying in the night :  
An infant crying for the light :  
And with no language but a cry.’

Then her sleepiness overcoming her, she put out the fast-sinking candle and went to her bedroom. Before getting into bed, however, she pulled her blind on one side to catch sight of the windows of the Knoll, and a new feeling of rapture stole over her in the thought that there, beneath those firs and under that red roof, were people, beautiful and gracious, who had invited her to be their friend. It was the parting of the ways, though she did not know it.

And now, having said good-night to Mora, we must take a peep at the Blakes ; for Mrs. Blake’s enjoyment of the evening had had a very salutary effect upon her intelligence, and when Paul took the white kitten up in his arms and said, as he looked down at his wife over the fur, ‘What will you give me for this?’ she rose slowly from her seat and whispered, ‘I will tell you all I can remember.’

Paul knew well enough to what she was alluding, so he said, ‘Was it your father who was with you that night?’

‘Yes,’ she answered, ‘and he threw the oil about.’

‘Who got the gin?’ he asked in a casual voice, but his heart was beginning to beat with the knowledge that he was on the eve of the discovery that would saddle the crime of the burning of Sellcuts’ on the right back.

‘Lardy got it. I gave him my brooch to get the money with.’

‘Was your father kind to you?’ was the next question.

'No,' replied Maggie, shivering. 'He said he'd pay you out for taking me away.'

'He has said that before,' rejoined Paul, 'you need not mind him. What else did he say?'

'He said that every one would think that I had thrown the oil about, and that I must come up to London with Lardy and Green Gooseberry, or the police would get me.'

'Was any one else with you?'

'Yes, Miss Colani and Miss L'Estrange, but they went away.'

'Who was it came and fetched you from here?' asked Paul, putting the kitten into her lap as she sat down once more, and the unwonted brightness began to die out of her face.

'It was Lardy, but he had on Miss L'Estrange's hat and cloak.'

There was silence for a few moments, and Paul waited, hardly daring to breathe for fear of snapping the thread of the feeble reason.

'Elsie said it was a lady in the carriage,' whispered Mrs. Blake, the old sly look stealing into her eyes. And then, for the next quarter of an hour or so, her husband had his work cut out in trying to soothe her, and prevent her from letting herself go and relapsing into the paroxysms of shrieking that were so unnerving to listen to and so exhausting for the sufferer.

It was of no use to try and get any more out of her after this, so he persuaded her to go to bed, promising to come and smoke beside her until she fell asleep.

While she was being undressed, he sent for the housemaid to his smoking-room. The girl came in with a half-apprehensive, half-defiant look that told its own story. 'Now then,' he said, pointing to a chair,

'you are to tell me the story of how Mrs. Blake came to leave the house on Saturday.'

'I have nothing to tell,' she replied saucily, 'except that she went of her own accord.'

'That won't do,' retorted Mr. Blake coolly; 'if you don't treat me with candour, I'll telephone for the Chief Constable to come up'; and he moved to the telephone as he said this.

'No, no!' cried the girl in terror, 'don't do that, sir; I'll tell you.'

'You'd best look sharp then,' said Mr. Blake in his driest business voice, 'for I have no time to waste.'

'A gentleman called saying he was Mrs. Blake's brother, and that you were sending up a carriage to fetch Mrs. Blake to the Hall, and when it came there was a lady in it; I don't know what her name was.'

'Do you mean to say that you believed all this in face of what I had told you in the morning—that I was going to Kingsboro' Castle, and that Mrs. Blake could not be seen if any one called?'

'I did, sir,' said Elsie, but she did not lift her eyes from the carpet, nor did her listener believe her story.

'How much did Mr. Dukelle give you to do this?' asked Mr. Blake, hitting out at random.

The girl was silent, but he saw that she was biting her lips and screwing the end of her apron up into a knot.

'It will be so much the worse for you if you do not make a clean breast of your part in this diabolical plot,' said her questioner. 'How much did Mr. Dukelle give you?'

'A sovereign,' said the girl.

'Hand it over to me,' said the manager. Elsie handed it to him, and burst into tears. 'It's all the money I have,' she said.

'What wages are you receiving in my employ?' he asked sternly.

'Twenty pounds a year and all found,' she answered mechanically.

'Then I should have thought that even from the monetary point of view it was better to serve me than those Dukelles,' said Mr. Blake. 'You have got yourself mixed up in a very serious business, and there's no telling how it may end.'

'That's my money,' cried the wretched girl. 'If you have any pity you'll give it me back.'

'I have a great deal of pity,' he said, 'but it's not so much for you as for my poor wife, whom you would have helped to put into the hands of the cruellest ruffian that ever was; and for myself, in the burning down of a place on which I have spent so much time and money. You'll be better without than with this Judas money. Now go; and if you have any pity for yourself you will set about atoning for the wrong you have done.'

Perhaps the master of the Knoll meant well in his righteous hardness with the miserable sinner before him, and perhaps it was politic to keep at long arm's-length one who served under his roof, and against whom he had so great a cause for complaint; but if he had known the dread secret she was carrying, and had given her one merciful word of kindness, she had dropped at his feet and told him all, and implored him to forgive and save her, and let her earn his trust by most faithful service in the future.

When she had gone he rang up the Chief Constable, and arranged to pay him a late visit at once, as there was something of importance to communicate.

'I mustn't give that girl a chance of running off,' he said to himself, 'for, though I've taken her money away, she may get hold of some from elsewhere.'

So he rang the bell and desired that Elsie should be sent to him again. 'I have reason to wish that special care should be taken of my wife to-night,' he said. 'I believe I can expect you to do so. I want you to sit in my dressing-room till I come home. I shall be late. You can use a rocking-chair, and doze off if you want to, but if she should be restless after the shock she has had I want you to be on hand to soothe her. Can I trust you this time?' Yes, he could trust her; she would do her best to atone.

'James will be below if you need anything.' And he went.

'I'm sure there is something wrong with that girl,' he muttered to himself, 'and I know she has not told me all.'

## CHAPTER V

### THE CAMELOT THEATRE

THE house had been a very full one, and there was little doubt in the minds of the knowing ones that Simpson's latest venture was going to be a howling success, and would have a long run.

The piece had gone without a hitch from start to finish, and had carried the enthusiasm of the audience beyond anything that could be recalled of former triumphs.

'I wish they hadn't called it *Mephistopheles*, though,' said a buxom mother of four rosy-cheeked girls ; 'it sounds rather too familiar. It's like playing with sacred things.'

'Well, I don't think "Mephistopheles" is very sacred,' cried the youngest. 'I think he's very profane. He said "damn" quite a great many times.'

'That's because he had to do so in the play,' suggested the elder one ; 'but wasn't it awful when the red flames swallowed him up ?'

'Ah, but wasn't it lovely when "Beatrice" went up to heaven on blue clouds ?' chimed in another.

And so they chattered on till their cab came, a happy part of the apparently light-hearted crowd that lingered outside the theatre the second night of the new play.

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But the stage-manager's brow was clouded, and he looked like a very tired and much-worried man, who ought to go to bed for a week and get a sorely-needed rest.

He was sitting alone in his tiny office, reviewing some of the main points of that night's performance, and musing thus to himself—

'Can't for the life of me think why the Dukelles cut it. I offered them a sight better screw than they'd have had elsewhere. Can't make head or tail of it. I don't believe a word about their being "dunned" as a reason for hooking it. They've been nothing else but dunned all their lives! No! There's something else in the wind. I wonder if Blake is up to some double game or other! And yet he's the last man to do a dirty thing. He's a hard hand at a bargain, but he's straight and fair-dealing as a hurricane.'

There was a knock at the door, and in answer to his 'Come in!' a very much-dressed young lady thrust in a huge hat with plumes like a hearse, and a very small portion of head visible beneath, and cried, 'Aren't you coming?'

'Oh, it's you, Jinny, is it?' he responded, brightening up a little. 'Yes, I'm coming; wait while I put away a few things.'

'Just think of Sellcuts' catching fire like that,' she went on, while he pulled off his patent leather boots, and put on a pair of less genteel pretensions. 'What a narrow escape we had! Poor Paul Blake! I'm sorry for him. He'll have lost a deal over it. They say it's only insured for half of what he paid for it.'

'Well, I'm glad you got away safely anyhow,' said Mr. Simpson, gallantly planting a kiss on her ear as she lent her head sideways against the cupboard.

'I don't believe you mean it, Charley,' she said with

a little sigh ; 'but I'll tell you one thing—you'll never catch me going anywhere with that beast Dukelle again. He is a devil,' she repeated, stamping her foot as she spoke. 'He made that wretched Maggie Blake so drunk that I went off and left them. I couldn't do any good for her by staying, and you know I never liked Green Gooseberry. She is a wild one, and no mistake. Think of her going and marrying that Lardy Dukelle ! Why, he can't keep himself, let alone her. Just think of that old beast taking L'Estrange and me into the house in the Cut for supper ! I'd like to shoot him. Lardy came back dressed up in L'Estrange's clothes. He said it was for a bet. I don't believe it. But I can't think where she went. You never heard such language as he used coming home—the old one, I mean—because Maggie Blake and Green Gooseberry were not with us. I cut and ran when we got to Victoria, I can tell you.'

'Where do you think they are?' asked Charley Simpson, as, arm - in - arm, and both puffing their cigarettes, they walked along the Embankment towards Westminster Bridge, somewhat slowly, for it was a starry night, or, more properly speaking, morning, and not bitterly cold.

'I can't guess,' was the answer. 'I suppose they are together.'

'I can only go by the wire they sent, and what their landlady told me. She said they had a cable calling them to New York to an uncle there. The wire simply said, "Sorry to disappoint 'Mephistopheles,' engaged elsewhere.",'

'They haven't gone to America,' cried Miss Colani scornfully. 'That's a ruse to put you off the scent. They'll none of them disappoint Mr. Meph. in the long run,' she added significantly. 'But I always feel

sorry for Lardy ; he'd everything against him as a little chap. Mrs. Dukelle, his mother, was—— ! My ! She was a kipper, and no mistake.'

They were both silent for a little while, and then, the cigarettes being smoked out, they changed arms, being tired, and began again about the play and the parts.

'I'm glad Stuart Mackay has taken Meph.'s part,' said Miss Colani. 'He's a sobersides if you like ; and though I don't hold with being straitlaced, it's much nicer to act with a man that isn't drunk. Dukelle's horrid when he happens to be sober,—but when he's drunk ! Ugh ! When I was going up to heaven in that last rehearsal he pulled my leg that spitefully, and nearly spilt me. I'd hard work to keep from hollering. It's left a mark. And then his breath is disgusting, and he puts you out so.'

'He's splendid as the hero,' rejoined her companion thoughtfully. 'He can pump the gallery better than any other man I know.'

'Yes, I know it ! The wretched old humbug ! Sometimes, when he has thrashed Maggie till there have been great red wheals over her, I've seen him crying real tears over her the same evening when they've been on together, and she's been the ill-treated heroine and he the broken - hearted lover ; and the gallery would be crying like a waterspout ! They like to cry. Oh, I hope he'll get paid out some day !'

By this time the pair had reached Miss Colani's lodgings, and with a parting kiss they separated, Mr. Simpson to hail a passing hansom, and the young lady to let herself in by the aid of a latch-key.

'Hullo, old dear ! Why aren't you in bed ?' she cried cheerily to an old and blind woman who sat knitting by the bright fire.

'I wasn't sleepy, child ; so I thought I'd sit up and have your supper hot for you.'

With wonderful alacrity the last speaker got up, and began arranging the hot plates out of the little oven to receive the contents of the stewpan, from which came a most reassuring smell of good things to come.

The pair were strangely unlike one another, and made an interesting picture in the gaudy little room—the homely-looking old peasant woman, in her blue calico gown, and the showy, breezy, overdressed young one.

'We don't belong to each other by law,' the younger one once remarked, 'but I'd like any one to try and take my old dear from me. That's all !'

Miss Romola Colani, whose humbler real name figured in the registrar's books as Jane Elizabeth Brown, was what is known as a dashing young person, well favoured, and of about thirty-two.

Early in life—so early that it nearly ended that life—she was left by her father and mother in the care of one of our great railway companies, but without the latter's consent. Indeed, they repudiated the charge as promptly as possible ; and the helpless, gasping bundle of unwanted humanity was carried by a stalwart policeman from the third-class waiting-room at the station to the police office, and from there to the work-house.

Fortunately the guardians of the poor of that parish happened to favour the boarding-out system, and little Jane grew up in the pure and homely atmosphere of a labourer's cottage in the country.

She was a 'reglar handful,' as her foster-mother declared, but an amusing and affectionate handful withal ; and it was with many tears and copious sobbing

that at sixteen she was sent by order of the guardians to her first place.

But it was by her own order she ran away from that place at the end of a year, leaving a farewell note of explanation for her disconsolate mistress, in these affecting words:—‘i don’t know ware i be going to, and i don’t care so long as i get away from here. ples tell Liza she can cheek herself now, and wipe bobbies noes when she feels like doin’ it. i leve yu my last munts wages.

so no more at present from yours truly  
jane e brown.’

Good human stuff doesn’t sink down to the mud as easily as some people think, and Jane Elizabeth, having sterling qualities of her own, kept afloat on the deep waters of London.

She had a sharp tongue, a warm heart, a keen scent for business, and a colossal, inexplicable contempt for men in general, and young ones in particular.

She got on to the stage somehow, and developed astonishing aptitude for the comic parts usually assigned to her, bore her numerous hardships and the long-continued hunger-pinch of dull times with reticent good humour.

She disappeared from London altogether for one year, and came back again to the Camelot Theatre when Mr. Paul Blake was its lessee, and was taken on again by that astute manager without a question.

‘Hope you’ve enjoyed your holidays,’ he remarked drily, ‘and are going to set to work and stick to it.’

She had done so for three years, when, hearing that her foster-mother, who had been going blind for some time, had finally lost her sight *in toto* and become a widow, and was in immediate danger of the work-

house, she got Mr. Blake to consent to an understudy, went with all haste to the familiar village and brought the lonely woman in triumph back to London.

Miss Colani had of late considerably changed her rôle, and no longer took the comic slavey or piquant lady's-maid. She had acted a tragic part one night as an understudy, and afterwards stuck to it, and was now recognised as one to whom any character setting forth the pains and penalties of unrequited love might safely be entrusted.

It was not that she was less cheery and resolute, nor was the subtle change in her tastes one that could be dated by others or herself ; it was apparently a case of becoming a trifle softer and more sympathetic, a trifle less ready to call attention to the weak places in other folk's reputations, and a little less sarcastic about men.

'My ! Ain't they good ?' she exclaimed, as she carefully laid the cleanly-picked bone of a rabbit's leg amid its late companions on her plate. 'There's nothing in the world like rabbit and onions when you're famishing, and I never knew any one cook them as you do, mother. I feel like the old sailor who said, "The Lord knows I'm thankful by the way I've been eating." I wonder if they give Charley Simpson a good supper when he gets home ?'

By and, by, when the supper things were cleared away, her old companion fumbled about in the back room for a minute or so, and returned, bringing a long blue envelope.

'Here's something that came for you to-night, Jinny,' she said simply.

Jane Elizabeth's heart began to beat unpleasantly with a premonition of something disagreeable, and her eyes grew misty with excitement as she read the solemn official mandate, calling upon her to appear

before the coroner of Brombridge, and declare, without fear or favour, what light she could throw on the death of Henry Williams, fireman.

'I've to go to Brombridge as a witness about the fire at Sellcuts,' she exclaimed. But the blind eyes could not see how pale she had become, nor descry the look of scare upon her face.

'I hope they'll pay your expenses,' said the blind woman. 'And if I were you, I'd just tell 'em straight out about that wicked man, Dukelle. It's only right they should know.'

'I guess they'll be wanting to get hold of him and Lardy,' said the younger woman, with a vindictive light glittering for a moment in her fine eyes.

'Serve them jolly well right, too, after the shabby way they've served the Camelot.'

In her heart of hearts Miss Colani hoped it would come out that the pair had set fire to Sellcuts', and done it out of malice prepense.

'I wouldn't mind if they roped in that L'Estrange woman as well. She's a regular bad lot. To think of any one playing Old Nick the way she does, and going about in Lardy's clothes like that. Lardy's a perfect fool to let her. And to think I ever let myself down to his level ! Ugh !'

This soliloquy was not, be it imagined, uttered aloud for the hearing of others, but it was a sort of excerpt of Jane Elizabeth's musings as she stood before her glass at 4<sup>2</sup> A.M. putting the harmless, necessary curlers into her originally straight black hair, and silently reviewing sundry episodes that lay back in the past.

But when she quietly rolled into her usual place beside her foster-mother in the gaily canopied bed, she clasped her hands together in front of her face on the pillow, and spoke thus with her heart :—

'I'm not the praying sort! There's a deal of pious rot which makes me sick when I come across it; but I somehow feel kind of spooney about Charley Simpson, he's not a bad sort, and the poor chap's very lonely now his mother is dead. But there's Flossy. I'd have to tell him about her, and it 'ud be like putting myself in his power. O Lord God! I always feel better when I talk to you. You know how I wish now I hadn't done what I did. I use very bad words now and then. I hope you don't hear them. But I hope you'll overlook all I've done amiss, and not throw it up against me for ever and ever. Amen.'

And having prayed thus with tears that made a wet place upon her pillow, she gently arranged a wedge of bedclothes between herself and her 'old dear,' and went to sleep with the slow, solemn music of Big Ben in her ear.

Charles Simpson, Esq., stood long and patiently on his doorstep awaiting the good pleasure of his landlady.

He had forgotten his latch-key, and was reduced to the extremity of having to ring her up.

'Let him ring,' she murmured to herself, 'I'm not a-going to hurry,' and straightway composed her senses to the sweet warmth of slumber again.

'Confound the woman!' cried the shivering man. 'Will she never wake?' Then he bethought himself of the efficacy of a handful of gravel to hurl as best he could at the basement window. But finding there was none that could be gathered up from the hard path in the tiny front garden, he sprang lightly over the low iron rail into the little plot in front of the empty house next door, where was a heap of unsorted remnants left behind in a moonlight flitting of several days ago. 'It won't do to throw a tin can,' he reflected, 'it might

break the window and I should have to pay for it.' So he finally decided on an ancient shoe as combining business with safety.

He was just returning with his selection when the dazzling glare of a bull's-eye lantern fell on his face as he strode over the rail.

'Wot are you a-doin'?' demanded a stern voice, while a strong clutch held him by the arm as with a vice.

Mr. Simpson was not a courageous man, also he was a very tired and hungry one, and the shock was so great, coming as it did on him in almost total darkness, that he suddenly fainted, and fell up against the policeman who held him by the arm.

The bobby was a kindly one, and concluding by the white tie, evening dress, and slender figure of the unconscious man, that he was a diner-out, and that he was trying to get in, rang the bell with such a terrific peal as brought the landlady up to the door like a shot, and ready to bring the house down about her lodger's ears for his 'imperence' in ringing her up.

'Wot d'yer keep people awaitin' out here in the cold like this for?' growled the deep voice of the policeman. 'Just you turn to and help me to carry this 'ere gentleman in, or you'll be had up for man-slaughter.'

Between them they laid him on the awkward sofa in the front parlour, and quickened his returning consciousness with a stiffish dose of brandy-and-water.

By this time the landlady was fully awake in more senses than one, and realising the importance of a conciliatory attitude, she pressed her liquid hospitality with such tearful earnestness on the man of law, that he consented to wash out the remembrance of her shortcomings in a welcome glass.

When he departed, and Mr. Simpson's explanations had soothed the ruffled plumage of the good woman, she retired with all speed to bed on his assurance that he would lock the front door and turn the gas out.

'By Jove! I've dropped the other keys!' said the young man to himself. 'That must have been when I fainted.' So he noiselessly opened the front door again, for fear of alarming Mrs. Best, and stole into the garden, going up to the rail and carefully hunting about in the meagre light of the adjacent street lamp, finding the bunch of keys at last on the narrow flower-bed.

By some strange chance or other, he looked casually up at the second-story window of the empty house, across which a ray from the lamp made a flicker on one of the panes; and again a swift dart of horror held his heart still, and sent thundering noises through his head, for there, pale, cadaverous, and wicked, was the cruel face of the elder Dukelle, pressed close against the window-pane.

While an agony of panic held him fast where he stood, the face had disappeared, and there was nothing but the glimmer of the wind-shaken pane on the dark and empty void of the blindless window.

He was glad enough to lock the front door and bolt it, and put the chain up with cold and trembling hands, for at any rate, bolt and chain seemed to be his only guardians from a nameless terror that had taken possession of him.

In vain did he try to persuade himself, as he sat warming his feet at the little gas stove, that what he had seen was a mere illusion of the brain, caused by the derangement of his circulation in fainting, and took another dose of brandy to steady his shaken nerves. 'Twas of little use, however, and as he sat there in the

silent room, he found himself listening for the horror of a footstep ; and once when the sound of a snore from Mrs. Best came up from below, a cold perspiration broke out on his forehead, and he shut his eyes lest he should see that face which had of a sudden begun to fill him with such indescribable fear.

‘What’s wrong with me?’ he cried, and he turned to the covered tray on the table, whereon lay the supper his landlady prepared for him each night before she retired.

It was a very uninviting repast—the outside pieces of yesterday’s badly roasted joint of mutton, pickles, and the top half torn off a cottage loaf of the day before yesterday’s baking. But he was faint for want of food, so he tried to eat.

‘I never felt afraid of the man before,’ he mused,—‘even if it were his face I saw. He’s a bad lot, and ugly as sin, and he used to treat his girl scandalously ; but he’s the best actor I know, and that L’Estrange woman keeps a tight hand on him.’

But it was no go, the dry meat stuck in his throat, and the dry bread choked him, so he gave up in despair and went to bed.

‘Jinny’s a good old sort,’ he murmured to himself, just as he was dropping off to sleep, ‘and mother liked her, but—’

## CHAPTER VI

### THE ADJOURNED INQUEST

NEVER had Brombridge known such a fever of excitement as that which raged in its usually sober precincts on and after the adjourned inquest.

At meals, at business, at school, the one and only topic of interest had been the fire, and the cause of it ; and the anonymous correspondence that flowed into the offices of the *Brombridge Times* and the *Daily Besom* was of such proportions as to necessitate the requisitioning of several extra wastepaper baskets.

Headlines of valiant dimensions budded and blossomed forth on hoardings and waste places ; and inadequate, but mysterious persons dropt into the police station, generally after dark, to communicate wholly irrelevant information for putting the police on the track of the scoundrels who had set fire to Sellcuts'.

For on one thing all were absolutely unanimous, and that was that the catastrophe had not been the result of accident.

The Narrow Way Pilgrims were divided in their opinion as to whether the crime lay at the door of the manager of the music hall, and that he was trying to screen himself behind the Dukelles, or of him of the Green Grapes ; but Sister Cox remained in a minority

of one in maintaining that the dead acrobat was the culprit, and that her death was a judgment for the deed.

But it did not occur to any of the Pilgrims that they had on a previous Sunday placed the credit of the destruction of the hall elsewhere,—a want of a sense of humour being a distinguishing feature of their body.

On the morning of the second inquest there was so dense a crowd in the High Street, that the police had hard work to get the witnesses safely into court.

A huge poster had announced—‘Great Temperance Victory in Brombridge,’ under the auspices of the *Times*; while the *Daily Besom* had promptly followed suit with one of equal size—‘Teetotal Bigotry Triumphant.’ But, as it happened, neither statement in the least described the causes that had led to the removing the inquest from the Goat and Fold to the Iron Building where the Narrow Way Pilgrims were wont to meet. The fact being that the long-suffering jury, including Mr. Verity and Mr. Bleby, had requisitioned the coroner’s clerk on the subject of their sufferings at the previous inquest, with the result that the Iron Hall had been selected as more commodious, and less noisome than the wretched little dancing saloon.

Also Mr. Bleby had extended his forgiveness to the Narrow Way Pilgrims over that little matter of their obtrusive thankfulness for the calamity that had shattered his uninsured window; for Mr. Ferrel had come over on the Monday evening and said that as it was his horse that had done the damage, he, Mr. Ferrel, would bear the expense of a new glass front. He was, however, careful to obey Mr. Blake’s imperative order that no word should escape him that could convey a hint to the hairdresser as to who was providing Mr. Ferrel with the money.

Furthermore, the young publican had asked Mr. Bleby to follow his wife to the grave, in company with the other deacons of Ebenezer, Mr. Paine having promised to conduct the service, as the dead had belonged to the Baptist community.

So human feelings had been at work, leavening even the lump of rigid asceticism in Brombridge, with the result that among that section, instead of averted and hostile looks, as on the occasion of the former inquest, both Mr. Blake and the bereaved publican were objects of more or less outspoken sympathy.

Even Mrs. Uraine had enclosed one of her 'Lilac Blossom Leaflets,' and writing on it in her delicate, obstinate handwriting—'With a prayer that it may be blessed to the reader,' had given it to the Colonel to deliver in person to the stricken publican; but there is every reason to fear that he mislaid it somewhere, and that it was never delivered.

Mora too, gathered some of her favourite Japanese chrysanthemums, and prevailed on the indolent Ted to promise to take them to Dr. Slaney to put on the coffin; but, owing to the preoccupation of his mind, her brother had forgotten about the doctor, and had taken them straight to the dead in the upper room of the Green Grapes.

Mr. Blake happened to be there at the time, bringing a wealth of choice exotics from London, to do the last sad honours of sympathy, and from that hour the youth had a warm and generous friend in the manager of Sellcuts', by whose side he walked up the town, in the slow and sorrowful wake of the velvet pall, to the cemetery which lay off the upper road.

Meanwhile Detective Grove had been silently and unceasingly at work collecting a formidable mass of evidence relating to the fire that caused the death of

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Henry Williams and Laura Dukelle, which evidence was of such a nature that at the end of several hours of examining many witnesses, the coroner gave directions for issuing a warrant for the arrest of James Dukelle; Clarence, otherwise Lardy Dukelle; Rachel Dag, alias Miss L'Estrange; and Elsie More; all of whom, with the exception of the latter, had failed to appear though subpœnaed to do so.

'I am sorry to say we must set Dr. Slaney's certificate on one side, and call for the attendance of Mrs. Blake,' said the coroner, after the Chief Constable had had his say.

So with feelings of mingled exasperation and well-grounded fear, all of which he kept carefully to himself, the manager drove off to the Knoll to fetch his wife.

He explained to her that she was wanted to tell some gentlemen how she got locked into the lamp-room the night of the fire.

'You needn't be afraid of them. They want to put your father where he can never hurt you again,' he said, as he helped her dress for the unpleasant ordeal.

There was a tremendous sensation when Mrs. Blake walked up to the table, holding her husband's arm, and several masculine hearts beat quicker than was their wont.

She wore a small Gainsboro' hat, slightly turned up at the side, with a diamond buckle, and her white face made a perfect dream picture in its setting of red-gold hair and black velvet. Except that same hair, colour there was none. As tall as her husband—for a woman her height was remarkable—even the very scant opportunity for display of graceful movement afforded by the crowded state of the hall, was sufficient to reveal a beauty of carriage that was more impressive in its

dignity and noiselessness than any speech could have been.

Something awoke in the coroner's brain; and if the thought that formed itself, as he looked with a new comprehension on the pair who had just taken their places, could have been translated into words, it would have read thus: 'What a glorious picture! No wonder he married her! There's a tragedy somewhere. She doesn't look like other people. I almost wish we hadn't sent for her.'

Aloud he said to Dr. Slaney, whose face was red with professional and personal anger—the first for the slight put on his certificate, the second for the cruelty to a half-imbecile young lady—'We will be as brief as possible with this witness.'

But he reckoned without Mr. Bleby, who had been appointed their foreman by the rest of the jury, not because they liked him, but because of his reputation as a brow-beater and debater.

With his small quarrelsome eyes, looking smaller than ever, and his debating-society manner, unpleasantly predominant, he was on to his feet at once with an objection.

'It would be well that Mrs. Blake should not sit beside her husband during her examination,' he said; 'it is very desirable there should be no colour given to any charge of collusion on the part of witnesses. A wife is legally supposed to be more or less under the coercion of her husband.'

There was a stentorian 'Hear, hear' from Pilgrim Blodger, who was at the back of the room, followed by a burst of hissing, in which the Colonel and Ted cheerfully bore their part, the latter whispering to Mr. Paine, 'I'd like to have him in a quiet place, with a nice thick stick in my hand.'

'I will protect the witness from any attempts at coercion,' said the coroner with a caustic smile; 'Mrs. Blake will remain by her husband.'

'Now, Mrs. Blake,' he went on kindly, fixing his eyes on her face as he spoke, 'we want you to feel quite at home here, and tell us what happened on Saturday night at the Hall.'

For a minute or so Maggie was silent, and her strange wild eyes wandered from the coroner to Dr. Slaney, and from the latter to the coroner.

Then a great miracle happened, for, placing her hand on her husband's as it lay on the table, she rose slowly to her feet, swayed once or twice, and then spoke in a wonderfully well modulated voice—the voice that had so charmed Mr. Blake in bygone days when he went nightly to the Camelot Theatre to see and hear her, as she cried to her lover to save her from the burning house in the play.

Her eyes darkened and deepened as she gazed fixedly at the startled gentleman in the large chair, and with an idea struggling in her bewildered brain that 'Paul' was in danger, she said—

'My father came and fetched me. He wore Miss L'Estrange's hat and clothes. He said I was to go to London with Green Gooseberry. He said Paul would not have me back. We had some bottles of gin. Lardy broke one of the bottles, the gin went all over the floor. He went to fill the lamp, and father pulled the can from him, and spilt it all over everything. Lardy said Green Gooseberry and I would catch fire, and he made us go up to the lamp-room. He said he'd come and fetch us, but he didn't come back. The door was locked, and we tried to get out when the smoke came. Father said he'd pay Paul out for taking me away. He said Paul stole me from him,

and lost him a lot of money, and so he would burn the place down, and they would say I did it when I was drunk. He said he would kill me if I didn't drink the gin. I did drink it. Paul said I wasn't ever to touch it again. I wanted to do as he said, I love him, he is so good to me.'

After saying these words she turned to Paul Blake with a sweet unwonted smile, and sat down beside him as a sane woman might have done.

As for him he was so carried away by his amazement at the collected and lucid way in which she had given her evidence, and the bewitching smile on her beautiful face as she looked at him, that all he had had to bear through her drinking and her imbecility, seemed as nothing to the gratified pride and love with which she had been capable of inspiring him, and which still kept the lover actively alive in him, in spite of his anxieties as her guardian.

Several men mopped their faces, and the coroner cleared his throat amid a cyclone of paper-rustling and pencil-scratching on the part of the army of reporters.

'You'd better give directions for Mrs. Blake's immediate withdrawal,' wrote Dr. Slaney on a slip of paper, 'unless we are to have a painful scene. This is a brief flicker of intellect before a corresponding collapse.'

'We have heard Mrs. Blake's story,' said the coroner, 'and admirably she has told it. But as she is in very delicate health, the business of the Court will be suspended during her retirement.'

But again did Mr. Bleby protest; and just as Mr. Blake rose to lead his wife away, and had motioned Dr. Slaney to accompany them, he was on his feet, and shouting with unnecessary violence—

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'That women ought to be detained, sir, we have not—'

'Sit down, sir,' cried the coroner, 'if neither decency nor—'

But neither Mr. Bleby nor the coroner finished their interrupted sentences, for a scream that paralysed every man of those present rang out from Mrs. Blake as she neared the door; and Miss Colani, who was entering at the moment, held out her arms in time to catch her as she fell, dragging the latter to the ground with her.

Then there was commotion indeed, and Mr. Verity, junior, took the opportunity of telling Mr. Bleby some home-truths—

'You infernal, meddlesome old fool, you! What do you go making such an ass of yourself for? Why don't you learn to hold your tongue? What a deuce of a mess you've made of it.'

Mr. Bleby made as though he did not hear, and went on jotting down notes in his notebook; but his hand shook, for that dreadful scream had unnerved him, and he had some susceptibilities in spite of his crabbed nature.

By and by the Court had another sensation, and that was when Detective Grove stood beside a bold and bloated-looking woman, who appeared as the landlady of the house in the Cut, from whence it transpired all the operations had been carried on for the successful burning of Sellcuts'.

It was to that house the elder Dukelle had taken Miss Colani under the pretence of its being a private hotel, when she had objected to the forcing of gin on Maggie Blake. It was at that house also, as the evidence clearly proved, that Elsie More had spent the night on the Friday previous to the catastrophe, returning to her situation on Saturday morning, her

absence being unknown to the rest of the household at the Knoll.

'And it was from there,' said the detective, 'that she carried out the sand that she had brought in the first place from Mr. Blake's hothouses, some time in the small hours of Saturday morning, and filled up the hydrant by the order of Dukelle, senior, and with the connivance of Dukelle, junior, as I shall prove.'

Also it was from this house that Dr. Slaney had observed the man and two women come out on the night of the fire.

'What has been the reputation of these houses?' asked the coroner. And it was in answer to this question that the virtue of Mr. Bleby did shine forth as the sun, and make manifest the wisdom that decrees the varied tempers and dispositions of men, even the cantankerous ones. For it was his dogged, irrepressible heckling that brought out, in startling colours, the double-dyed folly of a Town Council winking at the existence of disreputable houses on the plea of their being necessary to the protection of respectable ones, as that of Brombridge had done from time to time over the matter of the houses in the Cut.

Mr. Virtue, senior, must have had a bad time of it, if he had any conscience, on hearing, as he did hear, the evidence given by Miss Colani, Mr. Ferrel, Detective Grove, and the miserable Elsie herself, as to the doings past and present of No. 3 the Cut, and Rachel Dag's long connection with it.

'I endeavoured when I took on the lease of the Green Grapes and of Sellcuts,' testified Mr. Blake, 'to get the landlords of both places to consent to my bricking up the entrance from the hall and the public-house to the Cut. It is simply impossible to materially improve the character of either a place of amusement

or a public-house while they are in proximity to evil places like the Cut. I have tried from time to time to get my friend the Mayor to act, but there seemed always some insuperable difficulty in the way of his doing so.'

During Mr. Blake's cross-examination the Mayor had come in, and was standing at the back of the hall ; and as he so stood it began to dawn on him that the difficulties ought not to have been insurmountable, and that after all it might have been wiser to have run against the pocket interests of Lord Clanbinder, and Virtue, Liberty, and Virtue, rather than be a party to such an atrocious state of things as the inquest was laying bare.

So already there was a process going on by which the ultimate purification of Brombridge was to be accomplished through the burning of *Sellcups'* ; and if, as Mr. Paine remarked at the weekly social at Ebenezer that night, Brombridge was not one whit worse than scores of other towns of its size, still, it had suffered grievously in the past from the exclusiveness that made it so difficult to combine for the purpose of fighting a common evil. The Town Council, too, had not done their part, because, as men occupying positions of public trust, they ought to have subordinated personal and commercial interests to the moral and social welfare of the community.

'We have an open door to a better state of things,' cried he at the end of a rousing speech ; 'in God's name let us pass through it, even if we have to jostle shoulder to shoulder against those of our brothers and sisters who are unwashed, or of other companies than our own.'

But neither of the Miss Mimseys heard this, as their displeasure was not yet abated, and they had decided to

wait and see what the result of the special church meeting would be before committing themselves to any formal declaration of hostilities. So they had not come, nor brought any of their young ladies to the social as usual.

'It hasn't turned out as we hoped,' said Pilgrim Blodger uneasily to Deacon Thorpe, after the jury had separated.

'Are you sorry?' asked the deacon roguishly.

'Well, to tell you the truth, I can't say as I am,' replied the other. 'Mr. Blake have done his best, and I take it he've given a harder knock to the Cut than it have ever had before. But Sister Cox ain't satisfied.'

'Isn't she?' retorted the other with a laugh. 'Is she sorry to find that a good thing can come out of Nazareth?'

'She thinks the coroner have favoured Mr. Blake, and the Chief Constable knows more than he've owned to.'

'Oh, that's Bleby's doing!' cried the deacon. 'He's stuffed her up with his own foolishness. She does not pay the jury much of a compliment in so saying.'

'She thinks the jury all hope to get something by siding with Mr. Blake,' said the Pilgrim of the Narrow Way, wiping his Sunday hat with his sleeve.

'You tell Mrs. Cox she'd better learn to hold her tongue, till she knows what she's talking about,' said the deacon hotly, 'or she'll get into trouble with her gossip, and serve her right too, if she does.'

That evening did Mrs. Uraine demonstrate with much force and clearness to her family, that though Mr. Blake might persuade a coroner's jury and some eighteen reporters, also a whole townful of tolerably sane people, that he had, and could have, no possible motive in setting fire to a building, yet that

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she, Mrs. Uraine, who had never seen him or spoken to him, knew intimately the workings of his mind, and held a contrary opinion in face of all, except Mrs. Cox, with whom she thus asserted her spiritual kinship, though she despised and condemned her in the flesh at second-hand through her hairdresser, Mr. Bleby, having enlarged on Sister Cox's pious merits over soap-lather and wet hair.

Mrs. Uraine had elected to come down and sit in the drawing-room that evening for the first time for two months ; and Mora had arranged and decked the great room with affectionate care and industry.

Ted had placed the screens with a view to keeping out any chance draughts ; and the Colonel brought his wife downstairs on his arm with jovial gallantry.

Thus they were all totally unprepared for the storm that burst on their hitherto tranquil life. All the evidence of the inquest had been discussed, and Mora had listened with wide-open eyes to her father's account of Mrs. Blake's appearance as a witness. Ted had rubbed his hands, and writhed his long body about in various contortions indicative of unmitigated joy at the discomfiture of Mr. Bleby, who had drawn on his deserving head fierce bolts of wrath from the coroner, for the questions he had put to Elsie More and Miss Colani, insinuating their indebtedness to Mr. Blake.

Jane Elizabeth had in fact defied the coroner, and shouted at the small-eyed hairdresser, 'What a dirty little toad *you* must be not to know a clean man when you see him !'

It was getting on for nine o'clock when there came a loud ring at the front entrance of Brombridge Hall, and a few moments after Parker brought in a card for the Colonel.

'It is Mr. Blake,' he said deprecatingly ; 'you'll be civil to him, my dear, won't you ?'

'Do you expect me to receive such a person as that !' exclaimed his wife. 'Why, Henry, what are you thinking about ? Show him into the library, Parker, but you needn't ask him to sit down.'

'There's no fire there, mother,' said Mora with a dread that she was going to cry. 'Do let him come in here ! He was so very polite to father and me when we went to his house.'

'Of course he was,' said her mother sweetly. 'He knew what he was about ; such people always do. I'm sorry your father had not more judgment than to take his daughter to such a place. However, we won't recur to that. You must forget you ever went there.'

'Never !' retorted Mora in her heart ; but she looked helplessly across at Ted.

'Let me go and bring him in here, mammy,' said the boy ; 'he's such a gentleman ; it won't seem nice for us to behave to him like cads.'

'Mora,' said the Colonel, opening the door, 'come here a minute' ; and before her mother could interpose she had bounded out of the room, leaving Ted to a very bad quarter of an hour, and his mother's sweet-acid nagging, at the end of which he went off to bed.

When Mora entered the chilly library, Paul Blake was standing near the door with what looked like a lovely bundle of white fur in his arms.

No one would have thought, to look at his unclouded and serene face, that he had gone through enough worry that day to knock over an ordinary man.

'Here is the promised kitten, Miss Uraine,' he said kindly, as he made a move to place it in her arms. 'If you could see how my wife has taken to the one

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you gave her, I'm sure you wouldn't mind having waited for this.'

'Father,' said Mora, turning to her father, and her eyes were very dark and glowing, 'do you think I ought to take this present from Mr. Blake?'

'Why, yes, of course you ought, and say thank you for it,' replied her parent huskily.

So Mora wrapped one arm round the precious white bundle, and held out the other to the manager of 'Sell-cuts', saying, with a new grace of courtesy hitherto unknown to her—

'Oh, I am so glad to have it! I'm so glad I gave the other to your wife. It is too bad not to be able to ask you into the drawing-room, but mother is down this evening for the first time, and she cannot see many visitors.'

All of which was perfectly true; but it made the Colonel gasp, and realise that his daughter was a woman.

Meanwhile he had put a match to the fire, and even while Mora was speaking a joyous blaze burst out, and the cheery crackling of wood began.

'Stay and have a smoke,' said Mora's father recklessly. 'I don't smoke, but I have some choice cigars, and there is so much I want to hear about from you.'

So Mr. Blake, little recking of the anger he was rousing in Mrs. Uraine's bosom, and the revolution he was inaugurating, accepted the genial Colonel's invitation, and so absorbed did the two become that it was midnight before they separated.

Instead of going back to the drawing-room, Mora, who imagined that Ted was there, fled up to the turrett-room with her new treasure to busy herself in preparing a suitable cradle for the dainty cat-baby.

'It's a much more beautiful pussy than mine,' she

truly said ; but it was perhaps as well she did not know that Mr. Blake had written a cheque for twenty-five pounds in order that she might possess it ; for that sum represented the whole of her yearly allowance for dress and pocket-money.

Also it would have seemed little short of a crime to have accepted so costly a present from a comparative stranger, especially one whom her mother held in such abhorrence, and whose gift had displaced one from her cousin, Harry Margetson.

She had been fondling and nursing her new darling for half an hour or so when the door opened, and Ted came in, his boyish face flushed and unhappy.

‘What’s the matter ?’ cried his sister suspiciously, ‘is anything wrong ?’

‘Well, look here, Mora, don’t you think it’s too bad that we cannot be decently civil to a gentleman like Blake, all because mother’s got her mind stuffed with a lot of tommy-rot about the stage ? It’s past bearing, and I said so.’

‘You did !’ cried Mora excitedly. ‘Oh, Ted, what will father say ? You know he won’t have mother contradicted.’

‘I wish to goodness he’d contradict her himself ! I’m sure it wouldn’t do her as much harm as our pretending that we agree with her when we don’t does,’ he retorted doggedly.

‘It’s very difficult to be quite truthful with her,’ sighed Mora, taking Ted’s big hand, and passing it over the kitten’s white back. ‘You get into a way of saying what will please her, instead of what is true. I often have to do it, and I’d rather not. But you know her heart is weak, and father says she might drop dead any minute.’

‘Yes, I know ; and it’s just that that prevents one

from asking her where she got all her information from about Mr. Blake. I do so want to know, but I haven't the cheek to ask. For instance, she has just told me that Mrs. Blake isn't his wife.'

'How dare she!' cried Mora, blazing up in sudden passion. 'Well, if she wasn't our mother, I should say it was a downright wicked piece of scandal raked up from that old rubbish-heap, Mr. Bleby. Poor Mrs. Blake! The dear thing! And Mr. Blake too! What a shame!' and Mora burst into tears.

'Mrs. Uraine wants you in the drawing-room, Miss Mora,' said Parker's voice at the little door.

'I'm coming!' cried Mora, hastening to put the slumbering cat into its cradle, and taking a swift survey of her red and mottled eyebrows in the looking-glass.

'She'll see I've been crying. Oh, Ted, what shall I say? She's sure to ask me why.'

'Tell her the truth,' replied Ted resentfully. 'Tell her what I told you she said to me about Mrs. Blake. It may do some good.'

'Where have you been all this time?' asked Mrs. Uraine impatiently.

'I went to the library to father. Mr. Blake has brought the kitten,' said Mora evasively.

How could she tell her mother that her cousin Harry's gift had gone to Mrs. Blake, and that this one was Mr. Blake's gift to her? Alas, that so many years of hedging had made the art comparatively easy, under her mother's training.

'Why didn't he send it by a servant?' said the latter superciliously. 'If he were a gentleman he would have known that this was the correct thing to do. Why, you've been crying! What's the matter?'

'Ted told me what you said about Mrs. Blake not being Mr. Blake's wife,' faltered Mora, with a brave effort to be truthful at last.

'If I thought your tears were shed for sorrow at such a disreputable state of life, I should sympathise with you,' said her mother coldly. But there was a slight unwonted compunction in her heart; for after all she knew it was hardly the thing to have said to her kindly young son under the circumstances.

'I'm not crying for that!' cried Mora, with another outbreak of passion, 'it's because you are so unjust to them, and I know it's not true. I think it's awfully wicked to take away people's characters so. They've never done you any harm.'

Mrs. Uraine first of all looked at her young daughter with unmitigated surprise, and then with a fierce yearning to box her undutiful ears and send her to bed. But as she continued to gaze at her more closely, she realised that she was tall, past nineteen, and ought, in the natural order of things, to have been presented, with her cousin, the Hon. Alicia Margetson, to the Queen at the previous drawing-room.

So she exercised her habitual masterful equanimity of manner, and said with a cold ironical laugh—

'Well, things have come to a pretty pass when you and your brother dare to argue with your mother. But when you know as much of the world as I do, my dear, you'll know that loose morals are habitual with theatrical people. They are all alike. But we are told on Divine authority to have no fellowship with them; and it is my duty as your mother to protect you and Ted from the evil influence of these music-hall people. Your father is, or ought to be, of the same opinion as myself. Please ring the bell for Parker. I am feeling fatigued after this my first

coming down, and am not gaining strength as I could wish.'

Now the latter argument had been an effective weapon to hurl at the heart of husband and child on all previous occasions, and Mrs. Uraine did not doubt its efficacy in the present instance. Hitherto it had always brought the culprits to their knees with tender penitence, and a swift change of front from assertion to relinquishment.

But it was not so to-night ; and Mora's ring was so startling that it brought the affrighted Parker down-stairs in a trice.

'Don't be violent, Mora,' said her mother, flushing, as she passed out, 'it's bad form.' But in her heart of hearts she felt that her grip on her daughter was not so firm as it had been.

She had not come off with flying colours in her tussle with Ted and Mora ; but she encountered positive defeat when late that night, or more strictly speaking, very early next morning, she essayed to do battle with the Colonel.

When at 12.30 that guilty person stole softly to his bedroom, which latter opened into Mrs. Uraine's, he was summoned into her presence, and found her sitting up in bed propped up with pillows, mild, but majestic.

'And pray, Henry,' she began, 'have you been all this time with Mr. Blake ?'

'Yes, I have, my dear,' he responded cheerfully, 'and I have promised to dine with him to-morrow. But you ought to have been asleep long ago.' So saying, he stepped quickly to her side, and, kissing her lightly on the brow, left her, shutting the door between the two rooms with commendable promptness and decision.

This was not by a long way the first time that the Colonel had choked off an argument in this fashion ;

but it was the first time his defiance had been so openly hurled, as it were, in her face; and presaged as it had been by the revolt of Mora, and the protest of Ted, the poor lady felt that something must be done to restore her subjects to their former outwardly abject allegiance.

Long were the hours in which she lay awake debating the somewhat surprising turn of events, and many were the eloquent periods in which she imagined herself reminding her family that through all the past years her decisions on their pursuits, their meals, their friendships, the books they read, and the things they were to say and think about, had been hard, fast, and final.

It was late in the morning before she dropped asleep, but when she did so her dreams carried out the half-formed suggestions of that night's musings, and the most vivid of them portrayed a pleasant scene wherein Mr. Liberty of the great brewing firm, Harry Margetson, her nephew, and the Rev. Samuel Patchilove, Secretary to the Panjandrum Society, were all entreating her to bestow the hand of her daughter, Miss Mora Felicia Margetson Uraine, on them in holy matrimony.

It was therefore with restored good humour that she rose at noonday to her customary leisured round of small occupations; and as nothing was said on either side of the incident of the night before, she was under the impression that the storm had blown over, and the family peace had returned to its traditional basis.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE CHURCH MEETING

MR. PAINE was in his little study the morning after the inquest, playing the part of paternal tutor to two small boys, whom he was endeavouring to interest in the story of Canute and his courtiers. Mrs. Paine, with the tiny girl-baby in her lap, was sitting in the rocking-chair, listening with cordial appreciation to the controversy between the two young scholars as to whether a king ought to have had his chair put so near the edge of the water when he must have known the tide was coming in.

‘Perhapth he wanted to paddle,’ cried the younger one, with a new sympathy for monarchs born out of sundry seaside memories in the bygone summer.

‘I don’t think that was it,’ said the elder one slowly; ‘don’t you think, father, he hoped the sea would come up and drown some of his courtiers, who’d been bothering him so, so as he could get some new ones?’

Amid the hearty peal of laughter with which this was greeted by both parents, the study door opened, and Mr. Blake walked in.

‘You sound very unhappy,’ he said in his grave dry way, and Mr. Paine noted the sigh with which he took

the chair offered to him, and lifted one of the little boys on to his knee.

'I must apologise for interrupting you,' he said to Mrs. Paine, 'but I read the account of your husband's sermon on the burning of Sellcuts' in the *Brombridge Times* only this morning, and I felt I must come down and thank him from the bottom of my heart. I agree with every word of it. But I hope it won't get you into trouble with your congregation,' he added, turning to the minister.

'Well, if it does, I must face it,' replied the latter, smiling frankly at his visitor; 'there are worse things in the world than leaving Brombridge.'

'I hope you won't do that,' said Mr. Blake quickly, 'we need such men as you to hold the balance between bigotry on the one side and licentiousness on the other. There's a great work for us both to do in the future, and I hope you'll stay and do your share.'

'Is it your candid opinion that theatres and music halls deliberately minister to vice and encourage iniquity?' asked Mr. Paine a little anxiously. 'You see I have never but once been in a theatre in my life, and my little wife here—she was not my wife then—nearly broke her heart over it.'

'Ah, I shouldn't do so now, though!' cried Mrs. Paine eagerly, 'you have no idea how much I've learnt since then, through the children. They are all born actresses and actors, and men and women are only larger children. As they grow older they care less to dress up and act themselves, being tired, so they are glad for others to dress up and act for them. And just as I have to watch the children to see that they do not drift into naughty ways in their play, so it ought to be with the play of the grown-up children, but isn't.'

Mrs. Paine was not what is called a pretty woman—her complexion was sallow and her forehead too high and wide for beauty; but she had such a bright, kindly face, and there was so much good-humoured jollity about her, that the man in the street did not notice that her hair would have been more becoming if it had drooped a little over her brow, and that her gown was manifestly home-made. He simply felt all the better for coming across her; and, if he were devoutly inclined, thanked God for all the dear women who help sinful men to be at their best, without claiming too much from admiration for charm of flesh and colour.

To Mr. Blake she seemed the incarnation of motherly and domestic goodness, as she sat there with her sleeping baby in her lap, by the side of the cheerful hearth; and he made a mental note that, if he could help it, she and her husband should be saved unnecessary financial strain in times to come.

Aloud he answered, 'You've hit the truth exactly, Mrs. Paine; and I hope, by and by, a new *Sellcuts'* may be able to teach, not only this town, but others, that a *Variety* show can be as sweet as the home life of the best of those who come to it. But now, with your permission, I want to have a few words with your husband on a little matter: he will tell you afterwards what it is about.'

So Mrs. Paine and the children migrated to the kitchen, and the manager plunged at once into the business that had brought him.

'You know, I daresay, that my housemaid has been arrested,' he said. 'She proved to have been the one who filled up the hydrant with sand that she had stolen from my potting-house for the purpose: and she has made full confession, though not to me, of her share in

the diabolical plot to get my poor wife away from me, so she richly deserves the punishment she will probably get.'

Mr. Blake's voice was hard as he said this, and his face calm and unmoved ; and Mr. Paine looked at him with a sudden realisation of the dual nature of the man before him, who was so different a being from the one who had just before been sitting with a little child's head resting against his admirable coat, looking the very ideal of manly gentleness and grace.

' My groom has, however, informed me this morning that he is engaged to this girl, and he believes her to have been led away by tempting offers of money, in view of putting by towards a future home. The poor fellow is in great distress ; and as he is a very decent sort of chap, I promised to see what could be done.'

' What have you proposed in your own mind as possible to do under the circumstances ? ' questioned the minister.

' Some one ought to go and see her in gaol, and find out if she has parents, and win her confidence, if possible. I am certain she is holding something back. Now, men can't do these things. Have you any lady in your congregation whose tact and kindness could be trusted ? '

' The only woman I know that I'd trust to do such a delicate piece of work is my wife,' said Mr. Paine decidedly.

' Get Mrs. Paine to do it ! ' cried the manager, brightening up. ' I should say she's just the right sort. Tell her she shall have my carriage to go in comfortably, and she is to have *carte blanche* if money is needed. I know nothing about this wretched girl's antecedents. She has been with us three months, and has done her work extremely well. We change our servants pretty often,' continued Mr.

Blake. 'You see my poor wife cannot cope with housekeeping. I give all the orders and run the domestic show.'

'It's rather hard lines for you,' said Mr. Paine, with a note of keen sympathy in his voice. 'Why don't you have a housekeeper?'

'We tried it when we were first married,' replied his visitor; 'and we had four, one after the other,—one was too genteel to go into the kitchen, or do the marketing; one of them took to fainting in my smoking-room late at night; another kept an evidently rapacious family out of the perquisites; and the last one not only brought in drink for my wife and herself, but actually visited public-houses when they went out driving. As a result, Mrs. Blake had D.T., and I sent the housekeeper to the right-about, and don't mean to risk another such experience. My cook is a very capable woman, and has had a trying time with this housemaid. She was saucy and fast.'

'What is your opinion about those Dukelles?' asked Mr. Paine, after the matter of his wife's visit to the gaol had been satisfactorily arranged.

'If one might believe in the incarnation of a devil, Dukelle senior is that,' said the manager drily. 'He used to take companies on tour in the provinces, but his capacity for making off with the takings and leaving the rest in the lurch became such that at last no one would join him. He then took the management of the Camelot Theatre when I gave it up, and the place soon fell into low water. He adopted the crudest and cheapest form of melodrama, and that's bad business at the best. But it was his drunkenness that brought about the final crash. The one attraction to the Camelot, under his management, was his beautiful daughter, to whom rumour had

it that he behaved with fiendish barbarity. He was viciously drunk one night when he was acting, and let her fall with a fearful crash on to the stage, instead of catching her as he had to do, and I have always had a suspicion that it was revenge on his part because the audience had hissed him when he first came on. They had done so because the story of his having knocked her down and thrashed her the day before had got about. I had come to the Camelot that night, as on many previous ones, to see her, her beauty was so wonderful, and her voice so pathetic. It was I who took her to the hospital, and had her nursed and cared for. After this he disappeared for a while, and, I imagine, took up his abode with a gang of coiners in Belgium until recently, and his visit to this town, and the last crowning act of devilish revenge on my poor wife and myself. Do you mean to tell me that God loves that monster of damnable cruelty?' cried the manager, rising to his feet, and lo! yet another and a third Mr. Blake stood up before the minister with his fist clenched, his eyes ablaze, and his whole frame shaking with passion that might at any moment come perilously near murder.

'I do,' said Mr. Paine solemnly. 'For God knows what cleansing fires of agony that black soul has to go through, to make it white enough for His image to some day appear in it. You and I don't, or we should be able to feel some pity for him. But I hope they'll catch him; he's not fit to be at large; and I'd willingly have a hand in putting the handcuffs on him myself. For whatever fragmentary ideas may wisely be given to us of the possibilities of Divine love, we are responsible for trying to keep good order in this mortal life, and we have to lick the villainies whenever we get the chance.'

'That's a relief to my mind,' said Mr. Blake; 'for I tell you, when I remember the wheals on my wife's white body, I'd like to administer the "cat" with my own hand to the wretch who laid them there; and when I think of the scar under her beautiful hair, I'd like to crack open the head of the fiend who caused it. When, too, I have seen her drunk, or convulsed, and think she had the sweetest voice ever woman had, till he ruined it by forcing the hot liquor down her throat,—well, if God can forgive the devil who did that and more, I can't; and I anticipate with pleasure the dose of justice that I believe is waiting for him before his score is wiped off the final account.'

Then the passion passed away, and the manager gave a little cough, and sat down once more in his chair, the quiet, self-possessed, and courteous gentleman who had interrupted the children's lessons; and waited for his host to speak.

'Have a smoke,' said the minister a little hurriedly; for, to tell the truth, he was a bit fluttered by this sudden undraping, as it were, of the primordial savage, as well as strung up by the recital of the tragedy.

'It was a right noble thing of you to marry her!' he cried.

'There was nothing for it but to do so,' said the manager, as he carefully trimmed the end of his cigar. 'She's a very sweet and gentle creature when she's had nothing to scare her, and no taste of drink. One must have some human attraction in one's home life,' he added with a little sigh.

'Returning to the matter of your sermon,' said Mr. Blake, after a pause. 'How did your people take it?'

'Variously,' replied the minister drily; 'it is to be considered at a church meeting to-night.'

'Are your deacons with you?' queried the manager.

'All but two, fortunately. Mr. Bleby, the hairdresser, and Mr Cox, the saddler, are extremely bitter about it. Bleby is an able debater, and he may carry his resolution, which is practically a vote of censure, by sheer sleight of words. If he does, of course, I shall resign.'

'Where shall you go if you are forced to leave here?' was the next question.

'London,' was the laconic reply.

'I shall want to have a hand in it,' said Paul Blake, rising. 'So if you and your good wife will take me into your confidence, I shall be very much obliged to you. And, by the way,' he continued, as he held out his hand to say good-bye, 'if you will let me have the MS. of your sermon ready for printing, I'll have a few thousand copies struck off. It's one everybody ought to read.'

'I hope you'll send Mrs. Uraine one,' said the minister; 'she needs it badly enough. She has condescended to send me a ridiculous letter this morning about that sermon.'

'All right,' cried the manager, and it was the first time Mr. Blake had seen him smile, 'it's a duty I owe to her husband. She keeps him down with a high hand. Her girl might almost be a beauty if they hadn't gone out of their way to make her such a guy.'

So the two parted; and that same evening Mr. Paine went to the church meeting with a lighter heart and freer spirit than he might have done but for the manager's timely visit.

It was a stormy meeting on the whole, and indicated once or twice how extremes may meet at a given point.

For instance, Mrs. Cox, whose church membership

had not interfered with her becoming a leading light among the Narrow Way Pilgrims, sat side by side with Mr. Bleby, the former a solid fact turning the scale at two hundred and fifty pounds avoirdupois, and the latter a mighty atom, and attenuated at that.

At the appointed time the little man rose from his place, and read out with clear and biting enunciation the following resolution :—

‘Be it resolved at this meeting of the members of the Independent Baptists at Ebenezer Chapel assembled, that in view of the erroneous and dangerous doctrine contained in a sermon preached by the Rev. Robert Paine, from the pulpit of the said chapel, on the occasion of the burning of Sellcuts’ music hall, the said Robert Paine be requested to send in his resignation without unnecessary delay.’

With considerable skill of a certain kind did the mover of the resolution follow up the argument of error and danger ; and no one listened with keener interest than did the arraigned man himself. Only once was there the ghost of a smile, which passed softly over the face of the listeners as the speaker pleaded for the purity of ‘our wives and daughters,’ he being notorious for his confirmed and scornful bachelorhood, and his profound contempt for married life and family joys.

After him came Mr. Cox, his seconder. He was a small pallid man, with a bewildered face, and slow and painful speech. The burden of his remarks was that ‘the females of the town need purtection from the deloodin’ wiles of men,’ and that ‘the weakness of the female sex bein’ her greatest charm in the eyes of her divinely appointed head,—here Deacon Thorpe’s wandering eye rested a moment on the capacious form of Mrs. Cox, and then encountered that of Mr. Paine,

and being a man of observation he was seized with a sudden violent cough, which somewhat perturbed Mr. Cox, and mixed his metaphors ; so, as Mr. Munney, the organist, remarked afterwards, he lost his head, and plunged stammering into the oil that Man had to cast on the troubled waters of female helplessness and innocence.

To Miss Mimsey had been entrusted the task of supporting ; and when Mr. Cox sat down, oozing from head to foot with a cold and cruel moisture wrung out of him by the greatness of the effort, she rose to her feet, pale and nervous, but determined. She had a sheaf of half-sheets of notepaper in her gloved and trembling hand, and there was a distinct shuffle of impatience among the audience as she made a frantic effort to get them sorted, and find the one from which to start.

'Plato once said,' she began, in her somewhat high-pitched voice,—but what it was that Plato said appropriate to a militant church meeting, Brombridge did not have a chance of hearing from the good lady's lips, for—with shame and grief be it spoken—a voice from the less well-lighted seats at the back of the long room ejaculated with concise and unequivocal decision,—'Hang Plato!' and Miss Mimsey dropped into her seat as if she had been shot ; while her papers sped to and fro with unbecoming levity under the seats to right and left of her.

Alas ! It was the Mayor who spoke thus ; and the uproar that followed for several minutes was such that, as Deacon Thorpe whispered to his sister, the Zoo was a fool to it.

'The old boy has had a drop too much,' said Mr. Veane, the postmaster ; and it was even so, for the Mayor had that evening given an official dinner to the

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Master of the Hounds, and the toasts had been many and congenial.

It was greatly to his credit that he had left the convivial scene to come to the solemn conclave that was to decide the fate of Mr. Paine; and he was sober enough to realise, after he had so forcibly interrupted, that both his manner and matter were unseemly in the highest degree.

When quiet had been restored, Mrs. Cox stood up and spake words of wisdom in a shrill and penetrating voice strangely at variance with her large dimensions.

'I didn't think we were coming here to consider about women's weakness,' she said, hurling a look of patient scorn in Mr. Cox's direction, 'them music halls and drinking bars is to be set down to the weakness of men'—(hear, hear, from Mr. Paine)—'and if men 'ud take care of themselves, we shouldn't hear so much waste talk about protecting females. There's far more men than women goes to such places, and men that had ought to be ashamed of themselves for going.' (How do you know? said one or two voices.) 'I've been there and seen them,' she replied somewhat defiantly. Here Miss Mimsey rose, glared scathingly at her, and sat down again, unable to speak from outraged propriety.

'Yes, ma'am, I have been there,' continued Mrs. Cox valiantly, 'which is more than you've had the courage to do. I've been there many a time before any one here stirred to stop it, to persuade foolish young girls to turn back from the brink of hell before it was too late.'

('Stuff and nonsense,' growled the Mayor.)

'It's not stuff and nonsense,' cried Mrs. Cox excitedly, 'when it's your own daughter that's taken to see half-naked women kicking their heels about, and to hear men singing that it's the funniest thing in the

world to make a girl a mother and leave her to face the shame alone, and then find another and do the same by her. It's not stuff and nonsense when it's your young wife that's gone with some one else's husband for a spree, and been treated to so much drink that she didn't know what she was doing, and stayed out all night in one of the houses in the Cut, and left her poor young husband to look after the two-months-old baby at home, and was never able to hold up her head again because it took convulsions and died. It's time to search with a lighted candle, and begin at Jerusalem,' she said, losing her breath and panting a little, 'when church members go to such places, and ministers of the Gospel pats 'em on the back for so doing. And so I support the resolution with all my heart'; and she sat down amid much clapping and some hissing; foremost among the clappers being Mr. Paine himself. For, to tell the truth, he had far more sympathy for her point of view than he had for that of the Mayor.

'I don't see,' said the frank pleasant voice of Deacon Fletcher, who was in the chair, 'what all this has to do with our pastor's sermon, in which he distinctly admitted that there are places of amusement which are a disgrace to our civilisation and our Christianity. He simply stated in different words that we must do as Mrs. Cox has done,—go and see for ourselves what is wrong, and set to work to put it right. The difference between himself and Mrs. Cox is, that while he thinks the amusement right and wants to free it from the vice and drink too often associated with it, she thinks the amusement itself wrong, and would do away with it altogether.' ('You can't separate 'em!' shouted Mrs. Cox.)

'Oh yes you can,' said the chairman kindly. 'David

danced before the Ark to express a people's joy and thanks to God. There was no vice or drink connected with that ; and some of us have seen dancing in which there was not a trace of anything objectionable. But to come to business ; what has all this to do with the point at issue, which is whether our ministers are to enjoy freedom of speech, or whether, like the Chinese gambler with his painted god, we are to fall upon them and to drive them from us if they should dare to take a different point of view from our own ? For my part I'm glad we've a minister with a backbone of his own, and I hope common-sense and not hysteria will decide the result of this meeting.'

'Do you mean to accuse me of hysteria, Deacon Fletcher ?' cried Mrs. Cox sternly.

'I did not say so,' said the deacon cautiously. 'But it will seem as if we had all got it, if we turn this meeting into a heated debate on the evils of low music halls, instead of keeping to the object that has brought us together, which is to decide whether we thank or censure Mr. Paine for his sermon ; and here let me say that Mr. Bleby's resolution is unfair on the face of it. The requisition that summoned us here said nothing about calling upon Mr. Paine to resign ; it only stated that as grave objection had been taken by leading members of the church to the pastor's utterance—I'm reading the form sent to me, and signed by Mr. Bleby, Miss Mimsey, Mr. and Mrs. Cox, Mr. Veane, and myself—the church would assemble to decide whether in view of peace and concord, a protest should or should not be sent to the pastor, with a hope that he will confine himself strictly to biblical subjects in the pulpit in the future.'

'Mr. Chairman,' said the Mayor, rather thickly, 'my official duties call me to another place, and I have to

go ; but I want to say that I vote for Mr. Paine, and everything he's said. He's pulled up the finances of this church in a most wonderful manner. He draws a better-sized congregation than any one else round here ; and he's a teetotaler,' concluded the chief magistrate, 'and that's an excellent thing in a minister.' ('And a Mayor too,' put in Mr. Veane.)

There was some quiet laughter as the last speaker left the room, and it roused sufficient good-humour to carry Deacon Thorpe's amendment to discard Mr. Bleby's resolution by an overwhelming majority.

Finally, after two hours had been spent on the matter, during which the length and frequence of Mr. Bleby's tongue did more to provoke a reaction in the minister's favour than to convince his irritated listeners, a resolution was carried with only two hands held up against it, to the effect that while the members of Ebenezer Church deplored the horrible amount of drinking and vice that had hitherto been connected with the stage, it realised that amusement is essential to the innocent enjoyment of life, and that it is the duty of Christian people to induce all concerned to purge amusements from what is foul and degrading, and render them fit for those who are passing from this life to Eternity.

It is almost needless to say that the two hands held up against were those of Mr. Bleby and Mrs. Cox, and that they severed their connection with Ebenezer there and then, leaving in a body, and with much ostentation of martyrdom in so doing.

I'm not sorry,' said Mr. Paine to his wife at supper that night. 'Mrs. Cox is a chronically foolish woman, with occasional lapses into common-sense and even pathos, and Bleby is "an adder that biteth the horse's heels, causing the rider to fall backwards," as Solomon

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says. Both are as useful as the toothache ; they call attention to what is rotten ; but, like it, are awfully hard to put up with.'

'I'm glad you haven't had to resign, Bob,' said his wife fondly ; 'it would have kept you awake all night.'

To the credit of the Mayor let it be told how he called next day on the eldest Miss Mimsey, and apologised with frank gallantry for his impulsive and comminatory treatment of Plato on the previous evening, and entirely soothed her ruffled spirit by accepting a copy of *Plato's Life, for the use of Students*, and by promising to read it. But it is to be hoped Heaven will forgive him, for he left the book at Dr. Slaney's on the way home, and was never known to reclaim it.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### 'NO. 72' BROMBRIDGE GAOL

BROMBRIDGE GAOL was a long, gray, ugly building, standing back from the main road, about two miles out of the town, and was approached by a somewhat narrow and very muddy lane.

On the box of Mr. Blake's carriage, beside the coachman, sat the gardener from Brombridge Hall, bearing a note from Colonel Uraine, J.P., to the Governor, asking him to allow Mrs. Paine to have an interview with a prisoner now awaiting her trial, viz. Elsie More, late housemaid to Mr. Blake.

To tell the truth, the lady inside the brougham was far from happy, or able to enjoy the unwonted luxury of a drive in a comfortable carriage.

Mrs. Paine had never been inside a prison before ; and though she was a brave woman, the thought of the awful people she might meet, and the sounds she might hear, set her heart beating with a dismal foreboding.

She had also heard that prison officials were such a brutal lot ; and having lived only with affectionate and humane folk, she felt quite uncertain how she ought to conduct herself when talking to a matron with 'a tearless eye of steel,' and a governor 'with a brow of

brooding thunder-clouds.' To be sure she had only the authority of a certain tiresome recitation, frequently given at the weekly church social by a conceited young man whom she loathed, for her somewhat pessimistic ideas of the physiological points of prison governors and matrons; but the recitation had done its work, and she was not happy.

When she alighted at the very ordinary-looking door, with its festively bright bell, over which the word 'Visitors' was inscribed, it gave her quite a shock and a sense of profanity in coming across anything so human, not to say genial, as a brass bell in such a solemn place.

Yet the shock reassured her; and as she walked behind the janitor, past the trim, wintry flower-beds and a well-kept lawn, up to the Governor's house, her spirits began to rise, and her courage with them.

Another surprise awaited her in the office, where she was very civilly asked to sit down; and that was in a glass-case hanging on the wall. With true feminine curiosity she walked up to it to see what it contained, and found that it exhibited sundry articles made by prisoners who had been in the Infirmary.

'A pair of socks, knitted by a man without thumbs,'—'Verses on leaving, by a grateful prisoner,'—and also, and that touched her to tears—'A pair of baby-boots, by a mother who has left her baby in the prison burying-ground.'

While she was wiping her eyes the door opened, and a voice said kindly: 'Very sorry to keep you waiting, Mrs. Paine'; and, turning round, she found herself face to face with the Governor, a tall, military-looking man, with white hair, and a face like a Burne-Jones angel. 'Ah, I see you have been looking at our "Forget-me-nots," as we call them,' he said as he shook hands.

'They are some of the softer shades of our prison life.'

'Then it isn't *all* hard and cruel?' said the minister's wife.

'No, but most of it has to be,' was the answer, 'because you see these prisoners have done wrong, and they have to be punished.'

After this the conversation turned to the object of Mrs. Paine's visit, and another surprise came to the latter in the kind and sympathetic way in which the Governor promised to let her have the interview in the matron's sitting-room, instead of the visitors' room, where, as he said, the talk could not be so private or so useful, as a warder would have to be present.

The matron's room was a pleasant little apartment looking out on to a large square of ground, in which the female prisoners took their daily exercise.

As for the matron herself, she was as different from Mrs. Paine's preconceived notion of her—*vide* the recitation—as the Governor had proved to be.

She was tall, slim, neatly but nicely gowned, had a pretty head of black hair, and a pair of kind, sincere gray eyes.

'I am so glad they have allowed some one to come and see this poor girl,' she said; 'she does nothing but cry, and it's heart-breaking to see her. She does not eat, and is quite light-headed at night.'

Now Mrs. Paine had not seen the gay, and very saucy housemaid at the Knoll, and consequently could not estimate the shocking change in her appearance that had taken place in so short a time; but her heart gave a great bound of pity when at the bidding of the matron, a forlorn, hollow-eyed creature crawled rather than walked into the room.

'I will leave you for half an hour,' said the matron, 'and I hope "72" will make a friend of you.'

'Can I—oh, can I trust you?' whispered the girl, sinking on to her knees in front of her new friend.

'Come here, child,' cried Mrs. Paine, opening out her arms; 'come here, and rest your poor little head, and tell me all about it.'

Oh, it was so good to lay the aching head where the soft baby curls were wont to lie so safely, and learn what a precious gift of God to a sorrow-stricken world is a level-headed woman with a warm heart, and men-folk about her who are able and willing to help her use herself where she is needed!

It was not long before the miserable story came out. Elsie had been housemaid at a swell boarding-house in London, where, being unusually flush of money, the Dukelles had taken up their quarters for a while. Lardy Dukelle had been 'keeping company' with her, said the unhappy girl; and, sorely against her will, but impelled to do so in the hope of keeping him faithful to her, she had taken the situation at the Knoll at his bidding, in order to help keep an eye on Mr. Blake's plans and his wife.

'The old bibber wants to get Maggie out of his clutches,' said Lardy, 'and he'll make it worth your while to go there for two or three months; and if he doesn't, I will. She's worth a lot of money to us; and then you and I can be married and go and set up for ourselves'

Once at the Knoll, being a bright and very attractive-looking girl, with a certain amount of quick repartee about her, Elsie had speedily won the somewhat stolid groom, James, and had become engaged to him, at the bidding of Lardy. 'It will throw dust in Blake's eyes,' he said, 'and prevent him from getting to hear that you go out with me.'

'But, my dear,' said Mrs. Paine very gently, 'how could you lend yourself to such a dreadfully cruel scheme as that?'

'Oh, I don't know,' wept the sinner, 'it didn't seem nearly so black then as it does now. I was in love with Lardy at the time, and—and—'

Then came out the other secret; and Mrs. Paine's tears fell fast and heavily over the thought of that innocent unwanted baby coming into the world handicapped by so dire a heredity of treachery and disgrace.

And there was the Gethsemane of agony, both physical and mental, that lay before the deserted and imprisoned mother; and she hoped with a hope that was as fierce and burning on Lardy Dukelle's behalf, as Miss Colani's had been for the elder one, that the bill of retribution owing to them and their kind will be fully paid off some day.

'Tell James what I have told you,' sobbed the girl. 'I'm not worthy he should ever think of me again. He's a nice young fellow, and part of my punishment is I got to be very fond of him. He's the first good man I ever was with.'

'Is Mr. Blake a good man?' asked Mrs. Paine with her heart in her mouth, for she was thinking of his kindness, and how hard it would be if his private character made it impossible to go on accepting it.

'Oh, yes! As far as women go. But he's so hard. He freezes you up. He's down on you like a file if you forget anything. And he's so particular. I never met such a tough one as he, you can't get round him. It's "do your work, or out you go." He has no pity for any one but his wife. He's foolishly good to her. She drinks and has hysterics. Lardy is her brother, you know. Her father tried to get at Mr. Blake to

shoot him, he was so mad at him for marrying her. She brought in a lot of money when she was on the stage. But oh !' cried the girl, relapsing into tears again—'if only Mr. Blake had spoken kinder to me that night, I'd have told him all.'

'Mr. Blake has shown a great deal of kindness to you,' replied Mrs. Paine, with a weight off her mind as regards his morality, and able to champion him now with a full heart ; 'he took the trouble to get the Governor to let me see you, because he thought you needed a friend, and he has sent me up in his carriage. It's more than a great many other people would have done. You haven't done much to deserve his pity, have you ?'

'No, I haven't,' cried the girl. 'And so 'twas he thought of it, was it ? Do you think he'd send my poor mother some money. She has to pay for my father in an asylum. I've been sending her a pound a month, and if I get put away I don't know what she'll do.'

'I'll ask him,' replied Mrs. Paine ; and once again she felt how sweet a thing is the possession of money for the lifting of heavy burdens from some of the weak shoulders that have to carry them.

Then she made a great effort, for she was new to the work, and went on with some timidity—'You know, my dear, God cares for you, whatever you have done ; let us kneel down and ask Him how we are to bear the trouble we are in.'

So in a low voice that trembled with a sense of its inadequacy, she taught the erring girl her first lesson in the seeking that leads to finding the never-failing help of the everlasting love.

When they arose from their knees the matron was standing with moved face, and the warder who was

with her lost a shade of the habitual gloom that was on her hard features.

'Now I hope you will try and be a good girl, "72,"' said the matron, as Elsie passed out with her apron to her face, and Mrs. Paine's kiss on her forehead.

'Yes, ma'am,' said "72" faintly, 'I'll try.'

'You would like perhaps to see over the prison,' said the matron, when they were alone once more; 'the Governor has offered to take you himself, and I can assure you that is a great honour,' she added, with a little smile.

During the next hour Mrs. Paine made the astonishing discovery that there was more of active Christian benevolence inside of Brombridge Gaol than in the whole town from which it took its name. At last she made a remark to this effect to her escort, as they came from the Infirmary.

'Ah, but you must not run away with the idea that all prisons and gaols are like this one,' he said sadly. 'We have a special charter of independence that leaves us with a little more freedom to be humane than is the case with the rest, which are all managed on a cut-and-dried routine that means well and does badly. Also Miss Percival, our matron, Mr. Scot, the superintendent of the Men's Wing, and our chaplain, are people it would be hard to find elsewhere. But at the same time even our gaol is a sad place for a young thing to get into. Prison life either breaks the spirit or hardens the heart of most of those who have to do with it, and I for one am a firm believer in the good results that would be obtained from adopting a radical change in our methods of dealing with the so-called criminal classes — say, on the lines of the Sherborne Reformatory in Massachussetts, or Concord Reformatory.'

When Mrs. Paine reached home the vociferous screaming of her robust-lunged baby was a sound of such heavenly sweetness in her ears, that she declared afterwards to her husband as they sat over the study fire, with the noisy one slumbering peacefully beside them in its cradle, that no joyous welcome from the rest of the household could have afforded her such a sudden sense of home joy as that.

'For oh, Bob!' she cried, 'those poor little prison babies seem as if they dare not cry. They just whined feebly, or whimpered a little as if they were afraid their voices were too loud.'

In the evening the pair went over to the Knoll, and found Colonel Uraine with Mr. Blake in the library, the latter remarking that Miss Mora was with Mrs. Blake in the morning-room.

Mrs. Paine related her story of the visit to the prison in her own simple unvarnished way, and her listeners were considerably moved thereat; more especially when she told of the pitiful plight of the miserable girl, and her relations with Lardy Dukelle.

'I thought something of the kind would be sure to come out,' remarked Mr. Blake quietly. 'What a pity she didn't make a clean breast of it that night!'

'She was afraid of you,' said Mrs. Paine.

'She might well be when she knew how infamously she was treating me. No one has the least cause to fear me that is fair and above-board with me,' and he rose from his chair, ostensibly to get another box of cigars, but in reality to prevent any shade of self-condemnation from appearing in his face to his guests.

For he was a very proud man this calm, self-possessed, self-reliant, capable gentleman, whose clothes and conduct and business capacity were alike unassailable. In his heart of hearts he knew he was hard, and

sometimes claimed his pound of flesh, where humanity suggested the waiving of that claim; and that knowledge did not usually perturb him in the least, or convince him that Paul Diggory Blake made a mistake in being hard on his less fortunately dowered fellow-mortals.

But to-night several things had conduced to bring him into touch with that part of his nature that was tender, generous, patient, and beautiful—that part of him that revealed itself in his delightful smile, and had shaped his head, his eyes, and his hands.

For one thing the resting of little Conrad Paine's head against his breast had woken for a while the silent hunger-pang that he hardly acknowledged to himself, though he knew it was always there—want of child-life in his home, and children of his own.

Then for another, Mora Uraine had cried angry tears in which shame had its share, as, standing by his writing-table, she had asked him in which of Tennyson's poems she was to look for the lines he had written in her birthday book.

He had told her it was not in Tennyson at all, and had laughed as he said so, wholly unknowing of the hurt he was inflicting, and had offered to lend her his choicest volumes of Shakespeare, that she might find the quotation for herself.

'Mother won't let me read any of Shakespeare's Plays,' said Mora, colouring and drawing up.

'Why not?' asked Mr. Blake.

'She says girls ought not to read poetry, except such as Mrs. Hemans's, Miss Havergal's—oh yes, and Miss Proctor's, and Longfellow's.'

'By George! how in the world are you to be educated if you are not allowed to read standard literature. Does your mother let you read novels?'

'No,' said Mora, getting redder and redder, 'she says they put wrong notions into your head.'

'What outrageous folly!' Mr. Blake ejaculated, and a loud sob recalled him to the fact of the strength of his language.

'I beg your pardon,' he added, a little flurried for him. 'Oh don't—don't do that! what have I said!'

'Only what's true, and what my aunt Lady Margetson said, when she came and spent a week with us. It never hurt me, though, to hear it said before, but it hurts me to-night'; and she pressed her handkerchief closely to her eyes in real anguish of spirit. Then she made a great effort to control herself, and added, 'I never read anything of Tennyson's but *The May Queen*, till you gave me that book, and I sat up all night to read *In Memoriam*. I've learnt most of it by heart.'

'I should like to hear you recite some of it, please,' replied the gentleman in his managerial voice; and there was some dry humour in his request, and, perhaps, unknown to himself, a vague stirring of a sympathetic and personal feeling for the handsome, ungainly girl before him, who had been kind to his wife.

But Mora took his request in the utmost good faith, and, planting herself on the rug, suddenly became transfigured before him, as, clasping her hands, she recited with most startling intensity, and some beauty of gesture, the first stanzas, beginning—

'I held it truth, with him who sings  
To one clear harp in divers tones,  
That men may rise on stepping-stones  
Of their dead selves to higher things.'

and passed on from them without a break, into the sixteenth, beginning—

‘What words are these have fall’n from me ?  
Can calm despair and wild unrest  
Be tenants of a single breast,  
Or sorrow such a changeling be ?’

‘You don’t do badly,’ he said, but he kept his astonishment to himself, ‘only this is too sad a sort of thing for a young lady of your age. Get your father to read *The Merchant of Venice* with you ; it’s more robust ; then repeat to your mother Portia’s speech about mercy. That will overcome her prejudice. I daresay she knows nothing about Shakespeare, except that he’s a bit coarse now and then. But so is the Bible, if you come to that, and we should lose some of the finest poetry we have if folks are not to read the Bible because it is coarse in parts.’

All this had stirred the softer part of Paul Blake, and helped the description of Elsie’s wretchedness to waken a sympathetic chord in him, and make him conscious that he had been somewhat harsh in his bearing to her while in his service.

Accordingly when Mrs. Paine came to that part of the story which told how his late housemaid had been sending a pound a month to her mother for the support of her father in a lunatic asylum, he promptly opened his pocket-book, and, taking out a five-pound note, gave it to Mrs. Paine, begging her to send it in monthly instalments to the poor mother, and apply to him for more when it was used up.

‘Mrs. Paine, you would like me to introduce my wife to you,’ he said, rising. ‘She is suffering greatly from exhaustion, after the excitement of the inquest ; but it is good for her to see a kind friend like yourself. Let us come to the morning-room.’

The minister's wife sighed softly to herself as she followed Sellcuts' manager along the richly carpeted corridor that led to the morning-room.

The walls were covered with the choicest pictures, and the sweet odour of many hyacinths mingled with a fragrant whiff of tobacco now and then, made a luxurious atmosphere in which it seemed hard to remind oneself of such ugly things as dirt, disease, poverty, sin, and death.

'I wonder how he came by his money?' she mused to herself, as he opened a door, and held up his finger to enjoin silence.

Then he stood still with his hands in his pockets, and a look of wonderful tenderness on his face; and she, stepping gently up to his side, saw a charming picture of two sleeping girls, and piled-up silken cushions.

'I never saw a prettier picture,' whispered Mrs. Paine, as they stole back to the library.

'Maggie is very beautiful at times,' said Paul Blake, 'and Miss Uraine would be exceedingly handsome if only she were properly dressed.'

'We can't all afford to dress as your wife does. But quite apart from her dresses, Mrs. Blake is the loveliest woman I ever saw.'

'So I thought when I married her, and so I think now. I have an idea that if she could have the constant companionship of a jolly sisterly girl like Miss Uraine, she would recover some of her lost intelligence.'

Now this speech would have been little short of blasphemy in Mrs. Paine's ears if delivered only the day before in her presence; for the Uraines, though by no means wealthy, were the *haut ton* of Brombridge and remote from the familiar social life of the town, as county families are wont to be. Not that they gave

themselves airs—really nice people rarely do—but the very courtesy of their speech and manners held within itself a barrier indefinable, but impassable.

Yet here was the manager of a music hall talking familiarly of the only daughter of Colonel Uraine as a 'jolly sisterly girl,' and suggesting her as a desirable companion for his wife, and that wife but lately an actress, sometimes a drunkard, and always an invalid!

But in the gaol that morning Mrs. Paine had realised what a leveller is human intercourse, and of how Pity breaks down class distinctions, reducing human beings to two common denominations,—the Sufferers and the Succourers. Also the spasm of a great scare had seized her heart? What if the refusal to be a Succourer bars the gate of heaven and opens the way to hell, compelling the careless one to be a Sufferer, in order to learn to pity suffering!

So her standard of values had shifted, though she was not aware of it, and she agreed with her host that it might be an excellent thing for both, but especially Miss Uraine,—'for one doesn't hear of her doing anything useful, and she never attends lectures as far as I know. It is a very idle kind of life for her to lead.'

'I'm going to work it round so that she shall come and stay with us when all this bother is over,' said the manager.

'Mrs. Uraine won't let her!' cried Mrs. Paine candidly.

'Won't she? Do you know her?'

'Well, no. But I once wrote to her asking her if she would contribute some flowers to our annual Christmas party for the poor of Brombridge, and she sent me a long letter saying that her conscience would not allow her to sanction such a gathering, as she heard we allow dancing at those parties.'

'And do you?'

'Yes, why not? We finish up with Sir Roger de Coverley, and you've no idea how the poor old people enjoy it.'

'Not the least doubt of it,' rejoined Mr. Blake. 'I suppose if they sat still and tore their neighbours to pieces, and ended up with a prayer meeting on behalf of the sinners in the next parish, that would be all right. Did she send you some tracts?'

'Heaps of them!' cried Mrs. Paine, 'but I couldn't use them. They some of them tell such lies, and many of them are written as if only poor people need to find Jesus Christ, and none of them seem to understand that the way to Him is not found entirely in printed matter.'

'I should think not!' replied the manager, 'but I'm glad to find that you and your husband are such sensible Christians. It's the cant and the pretence that make one suspicious of religious profession—not the real thing.'

'We left your daughter and my wife fast asleep, side by side, amid the pillows they had piled on the rug,' said Mr. Blake to the Colonel, as they re-entered the library; 'hadn't you better let Miss Mora spend the night here? We'll take care of her.'

But the Colonel jumped up in quick alarm at the bare suggestion, with an awful vision looming up before his mind's eye of Mora's mother's reception of him if he should present himself before her with the news that Mora was actually the guest of 'those low music-hall people' for the night.

'Oh no, thank you!' he replied with much energy, 'her mother does not like her to go from home.' But the good Colonel felt awkward at so curt a refusal, and he followed it up by saying, 'The fact is she came

here without telling her mother, and I think we had better go home at once. It is later than I thought.'

So Mr. Blake went off in quest of the young lady.

Mora was in the midst of a very lovely dream as her host stood looking down at the two sleepers, wondering how he could wake the one without frightening the other.

She was dreaming she lay on soft sand, with the white warm sea-spray falling on her bare feet,—that the gulls were calling out of the far distance overhead, and that she was feeling very drowsy, and very happy, her head resting against some one's kind and comfortable arm, and that she was making an effort to nestle closer against it. In her dream, when she opened her sleepy eyes to see who it was she was thus using as a pillow, she beheld the master of the Knoll standing before her, with the sun lighting up his brown hair and eyes, and his arms outstretched to lift her up.

'How did you know I was here?' she said in her dream; and awoke suddenly to see Mr. Blake standing over her in the bright gaslight, with a half-amused, half-anxious look on his face.

'Your father is getting impatient to take you home,' he whispered, pulling her up by her two hands. 'Did I startle you?'

'No,' said Mora, 'but, oh, you woke me out of such a happy dream!'

'What was it?' he said, as they walked the corridor side by side.

Mora told him.

'We must try and make it come true some day,' he said, facing her suddenly. 'Will you accompany my wife to the seaside when the spring comes, and I have to stay here for the building of the new Sellcuts?'

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‘Mother wouldn’t let me,’ replied Mora, all the lovely unwonted glow fading out of her eyes.

‘I must try and manage your mother,’ he replied.

‘It won’t be any use,’ said Mora with conviction, ‘no one manages mother, not even father.’

But the manager of Sellcuts’ held his peace, and resolved then and there on achieving the management of Mrs. Uraine.

Whether he succeeded or not, will be seen hereafter.

## CHAPTER IX

### MISS L'ESTRANGE VISITS JERSEY

THE Weymouth boat was unusually late in arriving at the quay, and there were not a great many people waiting in the chilly sunlight of a Jersey December morning, to welcome the incoming passengers.

Standing somewhat aloof from the rest, had loitered a tall, dark woman of evil face and voice, who appeared to be waiting with the utmost impatience for the tardy boat.

She was a black-browed, swarthy-faced woman, with an expression of eye between a leer and a stab that boded no good to a weaker foe.

She wore a scarlet toque, stuck into its place with gaudy gilt pins, and a long sable cape. Her dress was of plain black satin, and she seemed to be weighted with a quantity of jewelry.

No wonder she was impatient ; she had walked up and down for an hour, and had been obviously watched with some interest by two policemen, as she passed and repassed them in her impetuous walk.

‘Why do they so regard me ?’ she murmured ostensibly to herself in her somewhat foreign English, but carefully taking pains that it should reach the ear of one of the policemen, and evidently deciding not to walk past them any more ; which resolve compelled

her to stand still and become colder and colder about the feet, and did not improve her temper.

At last the steamer came into the harbour, and very soon there was nothing but the bustle and confusion of landing.

Off the narrow gangway stepped a thin and tall young lady, dressed in black, and wearing a white gauze veil. She walked awkwardly, and carried her dressing-bag in a somewhat masculine fashion, by the hand that grasped an umbrella, while with the other she clutched her skirts, and held them rather unnecessarily high.

'Ah, *ma mignonne !*' cried the scarlet toque with effusion ; and in a moment she had seized the bag from the tall girl in the black dress, and whispered as she kissed her, first on one cheek and then on the other through her veil, 'Drop your dress, you fool, you ! you're telling all the world what you are.'

A careful observer would have seen that the girl muttered something under her breath as she suddenly released her skirt, and have noted that she showed no sign of pleasure in the meeting with her companion.

'*Notre père n'est pas arrivé*,' said Madame in a tone of half-tender vexation to the very French-looking driver whom she had engaged to drive them. '*Ma sœur est très triste. Il faut que nous allons tout de suite à l'Hôtel du Continent, où nous attendons l'arrivée du Bateau de Southampton, qui est aussi en retard*,' and her eye rested for a moment on the back of the policeman who stood guarding a pile of luggage for some travellers who were animatedly discussing the non-arrival of a trunk.

'You'd better hold your tongue till we get out of hearing,' said Madame to her companion. 'You don't roar as gently as a sucking dove.'

'No more do you,' was the surly answer.

When the hotel was reached Madame's lamentations for her missing parent were so heartrending, that the good host and his wife promptly found her and her sister the quietest room in the little quaint wing, and set about getting their coffee and rolls with sympathetic alacrity.

Still, the tall girl in the sailor hat did not speak, but sat back in an easy chair with her legs crossed, holding a pencil as though it were a cigar; but Madame chatted and wept so continuously that the waiter would not have noticed her sister's silence, even if he had not been totally absorbed in the business of laying the table at record speed.

At last the pair were left alone, and after Madame had taken a careful survey of the empty corridor, and the crowded box-room next to them, she locked the door, and said in her ordinary, rather Cockney voice, 'Now then. Take your hat off, and let's begin, for I'm starving.'

'So am I,' said Lardy Dukelle, removing hat and veil, and then a golden wig, and further improving his personal comfort by divesting himself of his skirt.

'Where's your father?' said Miss L'Estrange after a while. 'I hope he's got away.'

'Not a ghost of an idea,' answered the young man. 'The fact is he gave me the slip in Liverpool, and I haven't seen him since.'

'How did you get the money to come on with?' queried his companion after another pause.

'Put my watch up the spout,' was the reply.

'That's a lie!' retorted the lady coolly. 'But I daresay it'll do as well as the truth.'

'Glad you think so,' said the youth rudely. 'Anyhow it's good enough for you.'

'Look here, Lardy,' she rejoined menacingly, 'don't you try your cheek on me or you'll get the worst of it, I can tell you. Keep it for Green Gooseberry, you'll need it badly enough with her.'

'Well, she won't have the chance,' replied Lardy a little less brutally. 'She's dead. Died in Brombridge Hospital after the fire.'

'Dead? Green Gooseberry dead? Tell me about it. I haven't heard a word since that night at Victoria. Green Gooseberry dead? What else?'

'Only a warrant out for your arrest,' he answered lightly.

'And for you and your father,' she added, her evil eyes glowing with a lurid light as she sat there toying with her knife.

'Well, don't look at me like that,' said Lardy, moving back from the table with a well-simulated yawn; 'there's no sort of sense in falling out with me.'

'No, there isn't, dear boy,' she replied, suddenly dropping into ordinary calm of voice and manner. 'Haven't you any idea where your father is?'

'Not the least,' said Lardy, and for once he spoke the truth. 'But what shall we do for money?'

'Oh, I've enough for a day or two,' she replied, off her guard for a moment.

'Then look here,' continued Lardy, leaning forward and speaking in a low voice, 'there's a boat for St. Malo at one. Let's go on that, and make our way as best we can to Paris. The Guv'nor's perfectly well able to take care of himself, and you and I can have a spree on our own account. The sooner we're out of this place the better, it's too near England.'

'I've got to make a pretence of going to meet the Southampton boat,' said the lady. 'You'd better stay here, and then when I come back we'll send for the

proprietor and arrange about going for the day to St. Malo. We can kid him with a promise of returning here in time to meet our "papa," who will certainly arrive to-morrow.'

So Madame arrayed herself once more in her scarlet toque and her French accent, and went off to meet the Southampton boat.

'Be sure you don't smoke,' she said, putting her head in again, 'or that will give away the whole show.'

As soon as he had made sure that she was fairly started, Lardy opened the handbag, and taking out from it a pair of brown Cheviot trousers, light overcoat, and tan shoes, proceeded to divest himself of his black silk blouse, jet waist-belt, brooch, and necklace, all of which he had pillaged from the lodgings of his dead bride, where he had robed in her clothes for flight, and kept an eye on convertible articles with a heartlessness that was eminently characteristic.

After arraying himself in more congenial toggery, he carefully brushed his upper lip with a fragrant gummy substance, affixing thereto a well-waxed moustache. Finally parting his hair at the side, he surveyed himself with much satisfaction in the mirror.

'Not likely,' he murmured to himself; 'she was bad enough when the Guv'nor was on hand to manage her; but it will be handy to leave these togs with her, she has good reason for not giving either them or me away.'

So it was with a malicious smile on his thin face that he folded up the skirt, jacket, and blouse, tied them up in a newspaper, and wrote on it in bold pencil writing: 'A ma chère sœur, Madame Dukelle, avec les sentiments d'un profond regret.' Then he added below as an afterthought, 'Au revoir!'

After kissing his hand in mock farewell to the pretty room, he strode down the corridor with a jaunty step, carrying his umbrella like a cane, and puffing at a cigar he had lighted on the way.

The old proprietor touched his bald head to him as he went out, and Lardy called to him in a cheerful rowdy voice, 'Dites à mes sœurs, quand elles reviendront du Southampton boat, et aussi à mon père, que je reviendrai dans une demie-heure.'

'They have a brother with them, then, and with their father that will make four to entertain,' said the wife, looking after the departing Lardy. 'It is quite a Godsend after the dull time that we have had.'

The boat in question being considerably more than an hour late, it was near ten o'clock when Madame returned, still lamenting, but somewhat consoled, as she told the proprietor and his wife, by the message delivered to her by the captain, who assured her that her father had been detained by business, but would certainly arrive on the morrow.

Now when Madame in the solitude of her room discovered the nature of the brief farewell left by her companion, it was just as well for his safety that by that time he was far on the way to St. Malo, and beyond the reach of pursuit, for her face was such, as with closely shut lips she blackened out the name of Dukelle on the parcel, that assuredly an onlooker would have seen murderer stamped on it, and have gone to the police.

'Did not my brother have some *eau-de-vie* or some *café noir*?' cried the affectionate sister to the waiter who brought up Lardy's parting message, which the proprietor had temporarily forgotten.

'*Non?*' So with sisterly tenderness she proceeded to order a *déjeuner* for three to be served at twelve.

Also to ask particulars concerning the exact time of the proposed pleasure trip to St. Malo.

'The boat for to-day is already departed,' said the host, and being accustomed to the gusty tempers of his wife and the chambermaids, he was not as much taken aback as he might have been at the language with which his information was received.

After the lady had exhausted her vocabulary, and perceived the utter unwisdom of her behaviour, she suddenly changed from outrageous abuse to tearful entreaty.

Ah, he must pardon her! Doubtless her expressions were incorrect. But she had been so closely shut up with her invalid father for the last few months that now to be in such a heavenly spot as Jersey, and have set her heart on seeing the beauties of St. Malo, and be disappointed through that poor little sister's mistake, was more than she could bear. And he would help her—she could see it in his so gentle air and mien—and set about arranging another jaunt for this day, and on the morrow her father would be with them to visit St. Malo.

Thus exhorted the kindly old man ran upstairs for the tourists' guide, and returning with a glowing face, set to work to help discover a suitable place in which Madame, her sister, and brother could while away the long hours which must elapse before the coming in of the next boat.

Then there were two bedrooms to choose, a double-bedded one for herself and sister, and one for her brother; also there was the luggage to fetch from the Hôtel St. Cloud, where she had at first decided to stop, but had yielded to the solicitations, so she said, of her sister to come to the Hôtel du Continent.

She was not sure she could describe her brother's

portmanteau, as she did not know which one he had brought with him. So the luggage had better wait till his return.

Meanwhile Madame would like to repose herself before *déjeuner*, only she must be called when it was ready if her brother and sister had not returned by then. They were certain to visit the shops, and she would be too famished if they loitered. So she laid herself down in the white bed with the pale blue coverlet, and the chambermaid closed the wooden jalousies, and seeing how many and massive were the gold ornaments she wore, scented a tip from afar, and wished her *bon repos* in her softest voice.

‘Elle est très riche,’ she murmured; ‘mais elle est rat!’ for Madame had snapped at her with unexpected ferocity when she had asked if there were anything else she required. Both the statements, however, needed editing, the first as not sufficiently defining the kind of wealth indicated, and the second as being too severe on a humble animal.

When Madame had rested her tired limbs, she arose and rang the bell, which was answered by the chambermaid.

‘Send the boots to the Hôtel St. Cloud, and let him bring my small black bag,’ she said, holding out a franc to the girl. ‘The larger things will do by and by. Tell him to ask for Madame D’Arblay’s dressing-bag.’

So the bag was fetched and delivered to its supposititious owner, who proceeded forthwith to make her toilet in readiness for the approaching meal and the drive to the Corbière after.

Whether it was the reviving influence of the admirably roasted chicken and the *compote* of Chaumantel pears, or the subtle joys of Heidsieck, with *café noir* in the finest Sèvres after, at any rate the fact remains that

Madame looked so charming in her neat black sailor hat and black blouse, relieved only by the gold necklace and large cross, the vivacity of her complexion toned by the white tulle veil, that as she stepped into the little carriage that was to convey the three to the Corbière, her old host redoubled his gallant attentions, and bowed until she had turned the corner.

How beautiful it was at La Corbière that afternoon, and what solace to the senses was there in the soft splendour of the mellow sunshine and the sweet, wild freshness of the sea.

But, alas, Madame was unable, so she told the driver, to find the smallest consolation in any of the beauties he pointed out, owing to the distraction of the non-appearance of her sister and brother.

Truth to tell, she was bored to death by the white lighthouse, the rocks, and the solitude. It seemed so much more dangerous to be the only figure standing out against that background of spray and sea than to be a unit in the thronging multitudes of a great city like London.

'I was a fool to come away,' she said to herself as she stood on the edge of the white causeway leading to the lighthouse, and looked down at the small imprisoned pool of exquisitely clear water at her feet. Another person would have remarked the hundreds of gorgeous sea-anemones that bloomed like happy sea-flowers from the sides of the causeway and the stones underneath the water, and would have found infinite enjoyment in watching the movements of the fragile tentacles stretched out like exploring hands.

But if Madame saw these it was with no adoring or sympathetic eye of rapture; for vicious living and cruel habits do not teach the eye to seek for beauty and love in the handicraft of God, nor train the thoughts and

feelings to flow along the innocent channels of pleasure and surprise in the presence of Nature.

By and by her habitual ill-temper was roused by the swift running past her of two bare-footed boys. Another person would have enjoyed their fleet, graceful movements, their fine brown limbs, and flushed faces. But Miss L'Estrange, *alias* Madame D'Arblay, *née* Rachel Dag, had no melting stuff in her, and grew so black of expression, as she scowled after their vanishing steps, that the little dog which had sniffed at her dress and given a short eager bark of inquiry as to where his two masters had gone, dropped his tail between his legs and ran off in terror.

After a while she grew tired of standing, and, seeking a likely-looking boulder, sat down in its kindly shelter.

Once a large crab, misled by the silence, crawled along a flat stone near her and dropped off on to the loose shells below. In a moment she had paled with the quick fear of the noise being that of a detective on her track, and passed her hand through the slit in her skirt to the pocket underneath, wherein she kept a loaded revolver. For a few moments her heart beat wildly, and then calmed again as the silence around her deepened.

'Beastly hole!' she said within herself as she mechanically watched the smoke of a steamer as it appeared on the horizon, and then sank out of sight, 'and I have to endure it for another hour!'

All the while she was following Lardy Dukelle, and picturing to herself what she would like to do to him if she could only get the chance. Next she thought of Green Gooseberry, and was a little relieved to think the girl had gone where she could tell no tales.

'And that's the end of her,' she said, as she rose at

last somewhat stiffly from her seat. Then a sudden thought darted across her like a flash of lightning—Green Gooseberry had received half of her contract money from Mr. Blake's secretary at Sellcuts'. Where was it?

'That's how he got the money to come over with!' she exclaimed, and again she was silent.

There was a beautiful violet sea-anemone before her which had caught the gleam of the setting sun as it slowly waved its fairy arms in the water, and she prodded it with the end of her parasol, and lunged at it till nothing but the fragments of the once lovely creature floated about on the tiny pool. Then she went for another, and yet another, stabbing straight into the starry centres, and not resting till she had bared all that part of the stone. 'I only wish I'd got him,' she muttered between her teeth; 'I'd serve him the same way, and you too, you sneaking toad,' she added, as she thought of the senior Dukelle, and how successfully he had given her the slip that night at Victoria.

'I'll be even with you yet,' and that was a thought that brought such a smile to her face as made it far worse to look upon than its usual scowl.

'Back to the Hôtel du Continent,' she cried, waving her sunshade to the driver; 'this place bores me to death. It's hideous.'

Just at that moment two young people were looking out upon the same scene a few yards distant from her, and the one was saying to the other, 'It is lovely enough to be a corner in Paradise.'

'It is Paradise for us,' replied the other, 'for where two who love as we do wander hand-in-hand, there is the Garden of Eden, and round them blows the Paradise breeze.'

Which little bit of conversation simply shows that

the mood of the soul within has everything to do with the making or the marring of the world without.

When Madame D'Arblay reached the hotel, she found a bright little fire burning in the tiny grate of the parlour, and the round table tastefully set out with glass and flowers for three.

There was also a telegram, which she opened with trembling haste in the presence of the proprietor's wife, who had come up ostensibly to see if Madame had received it, but in reality to whet her feminine curiosity as to the contents.

'Ah, *quel malheur !*' exclaimed Madame in despairing tones, 'que ma sœur est folle !' and then she proceeded to explain that her brother and sister had been out boating in St. Aubyn's Bay, and come back so extremely tired after their rowing that they must spend the night at the Somerville, and would certainly join her at 10.30 for *déjeuner* to-morrow.

'It is well to put me to this so needless expense of a charming dinner to please them,' cried she, turning to her simple-minded listener, 'but they shall be punished; they shall have to-morrow what I leave them to-night. Is it not so, my good friend ?'

So the good friend went off chuckling to think that the dashing-looking young brother with the fine moustache, of whom she had caught sight in the corridor, would taste her 'potage au crème de dindon'; also that she would be able to charge twice over for one meal.

After giving one more glance at her telegram, Madame put it in the fire, and set herself to the task of consuming the ravishing dinner *à la carte* in the solitude of her own society.

To do her justice, she paid a hearty tribute to the generous cooking, and sat down in the one easy-chair

after it was finished with a more genial expression of face than had yet distinguished her.

When the cloth was cleared away, she made sundry inquiries after the brand of cognac patronised by the little hotel, and finally agreed to give it a fair trial.

The proprietor himself brought up the precious fluid, and Madame graciously insisted on his drinking to her health and the safe arrival of her father on the morrow at her expense,—so she said; and having consented with pleased alacrity to her proposition, he wished her *bon soir* with much effusion and departed, primed with a large order for the *déjeuner* for four that was to be prepared the next morning at 10.30.

Madame was not long in consuming at least half the bottle of *eau-de-vie*, and the state of mind thus developed induced her to go to bed betimes.

Not that she was drunk; her ordinary potations had long been so strong as to admit of considerable indulgence without any appreciable incoherence of speech or action, but the nervous irritations to which she had been subjected by the manifest want of confidence in her shown so forcibly by the Dukelles, father and son, had had the vivid colour washed out of them, so to speak, by the congenial fluid, and sleep seemed to woo her to an agreeable oblivion.

When the morning came she was up and dressed in good time, and voluble with eager anticipation of the Southampton boat to the chambermaid, who hated her in secret but flattered her with glib tongue in view of the prospective tip.

She looked blacker of eyebrow and more swarthy of skin than ever, but her scarlet toque and massive gold ear-rings gave a certain gipsy brilliance to her appearance, and was she not *riche, très riche?*

'Tout de suite à dix heures et demie!' cried Madame as she stepped into the cab that was to drive her to the quay. Then an afterthought seemed to rush suddenly into her mind, for she stepped out again, and, going up to the proprietor, who stood bowing on the steps, she whispered in his ear to take special care of her dressing-bag in her absence, as she had left her gold bracelet in it.

When she had turned the corner, his wife went into her bedroom and bore off the precious and very heavy bag to a safe and secret shelter in her own little sitting-room.

Again the Southampton boat was late, and the driver of Madame's cab went off to get a drink in the interval.

As for Madame, she walked briskly backward and forward along the landing-stage, stamping her feet to keep them warm, and exchanging comments on the coldness of the morning with her old enemies, the two policemen, who had stared at her so the day before. If possible, her accent was more Frenchly French, and her attempts at English more broken than on the previous day; but her mood was a trifle more genial, and, after all, that scarlet toque was really becoming to her somewhat handsome, if evil, eyes.

At last the boat arrived, but Madame did not seem aware of the fact, nor did she emerge from the ladies' room, where she had gone to warm her feet.

No one had leisure in all the bustle of the unusually full boat of semi-invalids that had to be unloaded, to notice the poorly-dressed widow who sat dejectedly by the waiting-room table, with her cheek resting on her hand; and when Madame's coachman impatiently opened the door and looked in, asking her if she had seen a lady with a scarlet bonnet on, he hardly waited

for her feeble and languid reply, in the commonest of Cockney voices, 'No, sir; she ain't been 'ere; leastways not in my time she ain't.'

The widow's crape was rusty, and her face very pale, —that is to say, as much of it as was shown by the accidental rucking up of her thick crape veil; but the freshly washed and ironed white muslin bow that she wore at her chin bespoke self-respecting grief in poverty, and carried its own dignity with it.

After some time, one of the inspectors looked in and called out, 'If you're going by the London boat, ma'am, it's time you were on board. You'd best look sharp.'

'They said I was to wait 'ere for 'em,' replied the lone woman slowly; 'my two boys, I mean. 'Av you seen 'em, sir?'

'What! those two young men in gray with bowlers on?'

The widow nodded, and pulled her black cloth cloak more closely round her.

'Why, *they* went on some time ago! They must have forgotten all about you,' said the man. 'I'll take you, but you must step out quicker than this, if you are to catch that boat.'

He was very kind to the delicate, panting widow with the shabby black kid gloves and tiresome cough; and when she offered him some coppers with the remark as she hoped 'it 'ud stand 'im a drink for his kindness,' he was quite touched, and refused the proffered gift with real courtesy and good feeling. He escorted her on to the second-class end of the boat, having to rush off quickly just as the gangway was being pulled up.

All the voyage to Southampton the widow lay down in the empty cabin, and except that she had

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some brandy once, she ate nothing, lying still and coughing now and then.

The two young men in gray, with bowlers on, never once came near her; but this may have been because they were first-class passengers, and that the widow lady who accompanied them was also first-class, and her weeds of the newest and most fashionable order.

It was after five, and amid the thickest of fogs the shivering passengers stepped off the gangway at the quay, and a few stopped to buy papers of the blue-nosed boys whose voices sounded strangely muffled as they cried thrilling items of 'winners' and murders, in quavering accents close to the ear.

The widow bought the *Police Times*, and after getting a third-class ticket for London, settled herself in an empty carriage close to the engine, and began very energetically upon the bag of sandwiches she had bought at the refreshment counter.

After these, and a long pull from a flat bottle which she emptied and threw out of the window without any undue consideration for the possibility of its hitting any one happening to be on the line at that moment, she pulled out her paper and tried to read its copiously illustrated pages.

The light was very poor, and, with muttered words the reverse of benediction, she stood up in the carriage under the lamp to scan, with straining eyes, the rough outlines of some of the 'wanted' people.

'That won't help find him,' she thought as she held the paper at a more convenient angle, 'nor me. But Lardy's is very like.'

Meanwhile, at the Hôtel du Continent, there was such noise and excitement as even the casual tempers of tired and overworked folk could not wholly account for.

The *déjeuner* had waited and waited, until at last

the proprietor had gone himself to see if the Southampton boat had arrived, or if, perchance, Madame was awaiting the local one from Alderney.

No one except the policeman had noticed the lady in the scarlet toque, and she had not left the quay, he said, with the arrivals from England, for the coachman who had driven her down had watched and waited, and finally gone to the waiting-room and other places to look for her, and was still doing so. Then arose the unpleasant suggestion that she had perhaps gone off on the return boat ; but the ticket-seller had not sold a ticket for Southampton to any one answering at all to her description, certainly not to any one with fine black eyes and scarlet headgear, or he would have taken notice of them. So the proprietor returned with the air of a deeply dejected man, to break the tidings to his wife of the strange disappearance of Madame.

At first his partner was disposed to treat his fears with light ridicule of feminine quality.

' You are always for meeting trouble half-way,' she said ; ' we shall doubtless find that Madame has gone to the Hôtel St. Cloud to bring back the rest of her luggage. Besides, at the worst, her bill is but sixty francs, and the bag alone is worth more than that. It is of real leather, with solid silver clasps. Also, there is her gold bracelet within, which I shall not scruple to sell to-morrow if she return not this day.'

But, alas ! for the solid comfort afforded by the presence of the bag and the bracelet ; it was only too cruelly dispelled when a flurried porter from St. Cloud came rushing in to say that the Countess D'Arblay had just arrived, and missed her dressing-bag from the rest of the luggage that her maid had brought on the day before. It was found that it had been taken to the Hôtel du Continent.

Then, indeed, was strife and crying ; and the proprietor's wife threw herself on the precious bag, declaring it should not go—weeping, denouncing, and vociferating—until at last the police were sent for, and the real Madame D'Arblay—tall, gracious, and imposing—came with her husband and maid to identify and carry off the missing bag.

'But Madame has put her gold bracelet therein,' cried the poor woman, wringing her hands, 'and it is mine ! Do you hear, Auguste ?' she shrieked at her bald-headed partner, who stood with the bill for sixty francs in his hand, and his mouth wide open.

But when the owner had carefully examined the lock and fastenings, she found they had not been tampered with in the least, and declared that her bag could not possibly have been opened without showing signs of rough treatment.

But to further convince the weeping wife, the lady graciously unlocked the dainty Chubb, and let her search for the coveted bracelet. It was not there ; and, with most polite expressions of sympathy and commiseration, the trio drove away to St. Cloud with the innocent bag, leaving some passionate people to bewail and realise the cruel and skilful fraud that had been played upon them by the daughter of the father who never arrived, and the sister of the young lady who so mysteriously disappeared with the fascinating brother.

Perhaps if the inspector who had found the shabby widow in the waiting-room had discovered that her rusty crape skirt was lined with black satin, and her old black cape with sable, and had seen her washing her face in the lavatory, and noticed the swift magic with which she whipped off the scarlet velvet from her toque, thrusting it into that hidden pocket with the

revolver in it, he might have been able to afford a clue to the whereabouts of Miss L'Estrange *alias* Madame D'Arblay *née* Rachael Dag, who is so badly wanted for that little matter of the bill of sixty francs at the Hôtel du Continent. But as there was not the least reason why his mind should connect that very common object of travel, a lone widow, with the bold-eyed woman whom he had noticed on the quay for one or two days in a gaudy toque, he lost the chance of tracing the lady and frustrating her in her successful effort to keep out of the way.

As for the latter, it was a little past eight as she clambered somewhat wearily up the dark, narrow house in a dingy street in Bloomsbury.

Arrived at the top landing, she put a key silently and softly into the lock of the door, struggled with it for a few moments, holding her breath as she listened for any sound in the next room. Finally, she opened it and went in, carefully shutting and locking the door again. Then she looked out of the dirty window for a minute on the glistening pavement and the wet umbrellas of the passers-by, for it had begun to rain, and her eyes lighting on a policeman's helmet, some train of thought seemed quickened thereby, for she muttered something, and carefully pulled out the shutter, drew down the green blind over it, and, stealing across with a light step to the door, gently drew a thick plush curtain across that.

Next she lighted a small oil lamp and turned on the gas stove, and, sinking on to the nearest chair, gave a sigh of relief and abandoned herself to the luxury of silence, solitude, and speculation.

'Not a bad holiday that,' she mused to herself as the warmth of the fire stole up through the satin-lined dress, and kindled sundry longings for food and drink,

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which the sandwiches and flat bottle had alleviated, but not overcome. 'Only the cost of a franc for the loan of the Countess's bag, one night at the St. Cloud Hotel, the telegram I sent myself, and the ticket home! What luck to think I helped that blubbering fool look for the tickets she dropped at Waterloo. Oh, I could have laughed to hear her thank me all the way to Southampton for having restored her the ones I did not want. But if I had done so I should have given myself away; and I don't dare laugh now, as I don't know yet who has the next room. But it was as good as a circus! And to think I borrowed her lady's dressing - bag! My, it has been a cheap trip! I wonder where Lardy is! After all, it's much safer here in London than elsewhere. I shouldn't mind how soon James and Lardy got nabbed, if I were quite sure they wouldn't mention this address.'

Thus she communed with her bad heart, until the warmth and fatigue overcame her, and she dropt off to sleep, where we must leave her for a while.

## CHAPTER X

### MR. BLEBY SPEAKS IN A WHISPER

ONCE a fortnight for many years it had been Mr. Bleby's stern duty to investigate the condition of Mrs. Uraine's scalp, and place summary limits on the length of her beautiful tresses. In other words, he came every fortnight to shampoo and cut the hair of the mistress of Brombridge Hall.

'Such a head of hair as is the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit,' said Mr. Bleby, who was much given to imparting a biblical flavour to his conversation, also a little mixed in his quotations at times.

These visits had become so much part and parcel of Mrs. Uraine's life, that her husband and children had learnt to regard them as milestones by which household regulations were to be adjusted, and 'Mr. Bleby, you know, comes on that day,' was a reminder that made it impossible to consider the question of entertaining a friend at lunch or dinner.

Why, it would not have been easy to explain outside the range of Mrs. Uraine's influence; but inside of that it had always been the accepted order of things, and the Colonel, Mora, and Ted moved in so deeply cut a groove of obedience to her ordinances, it had never occurred to them until quite lately that there

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might not be the profound wisdom and incontrovertible justice in her trivial dictates—dictates they had been taught to believe in and be ruled by, but against which Mora was beginning to rebel in secret, and which she had even tried, feebly, it is true, to set aside, with only ignominious defeat as her portion.

‘No, no, my dear,’ her father had said, ‘you must not think of defying your mother. It may be irksome sometimes to obey all her orders, but it is safe.’

‘What’s the use of making a bother about it?’ Ted had remarked one day when Harry Margetson and a friend had written to say that they would like to drop in for lunch on a certain date on their way to a fishing-place, and Mrs. Uraine had directed Mora to write and decline their visit with regret, owing to her mother’s state of health. ‘It is Mr. Bleby’s day,’ said Mrs. Uraine, ‘so, of course, they can’t come.’

‘And why can’t they?’ Mora had cried angrily to her brother. ‘Mother does not come down to dinner on that day, and they would not want to see her.’ Which was quite true, though not wholly in the innocent way in which the girl meant it.

‘Goodness knows,’ answered Ted, ‘but what’s the use of making a bother about it?’

But her father’s words, ‘It may be irksome, but it’s safe,’ remained behind when the occasion of them was forgotten, and Mora had begun a process of debate within the silences of her disposition that was natural in so intelligent a girl, but full of danger to one so ignorant.

‘Better run into danger because you are free enough to do so, than be kept so safe that you can’t do anything you like,’ was the formula in which Mora’s mind was expressing itself within her.

Now the Colonel, like many other good people of

peaceful temperament, had unconsciously defied his wife's authority with such guileless simplicity of demeanour and artless evasion through the long years of married life, he had not the least idea that, except in one or two domestic details, his obedience was entirely due to his agreement with her decisions, and rarely brought his tastes into conflict with hers, but that in times of conflict he was more often the victor at the end.

He was one of those rare men whose experience of women in his youth was bounded by a good and capable mother on the north, two lovely sunny sisters east and west, and a simple, God-fearing nurse on the south. So, when his sweetheart rose like a rather cool sun on his pure and kindly feminine world he loved her for good and all, for her elegance of pious coldness, the innate selfishness of her reserve, which he took for maiden purity and modesty, also for the assumption of delicate health which, from the first, she had sedulously cultivated, but with increased vogue in later years, as being the necessary ideal of the life of a lady of assured social position but somewhat limited means.

To be sure, she was a great deal else besides the above. She was from the first an excellent manager, according to her lights. Meals were on time to the minute. Damask, glass, silver immaculate ; her children well behaved, and neatly if untastefully dressed ; also, each servant knew his or her work in the house and grounds, and was punctually paid for doing it, or promptly discharged for not doing it.

She was also very well read in certain directions, and had there been Cambridge or Oxford examinations in the lives of somewhat rigid but pious persons, or in biographies of missionary enterprise, she would have taken a first place in the list of successful candidates.

Of poetry she knew nothing outside the occasional pieces and hymns of devout folk like Miss Havergal, and other good people of that ilk, between whose limited expression of spiritual life and the great choir of other singers, human but immortal, Mrs. Uraine and the company to which she belonged drew an imaginary line, on one side of which were the 'elect,' the 'saved,' the 'chosen from the foundation of the world,' and, on the other, 'the world,' 'the flesh,' 'the devil,' and 'the lost.'

Had Mrs. Uraine been asked on which side of the line her own family stood she would have shaken her head, with polite deprecation, and have drawn in her thin lips to one side, saying, 'Ah, it is not for us to judge,' but would straightway have mounted the judgment-seat, and smiled as she comforted herself with the thought that any one belonging to her must be saved as a matter of course, if even by a fluke. For, after all, she was a faithful and devoted wife and mother, and loved her family as well as she was capable of loving anything outside her own opinion. For the latter she would be ready to die, but hardly for the former.

But if, as Dr. Slaney had had the audacity to do, not so long ago, one had asked what future she anticipated beyond death for Dissenters, Catholics, Jews, Turks, infidels, theatre and music-hall people, unmarried mothers, and novel-writers, she would unhesitatingly have replied in her coldest, most categorical of voices, 'These shall have their portion in the lake that burneth with fire, and the smoke of their torment goeth up for ever and ever.' But she would have made an exception in favour of Dr. Slaney and Mr. Bleby, both of whom were indispensable to her comfort, and personally known to her, which made all the difference in the world.

Of late Mrs. Uraine had been studying prophecy under the auspices of the Society for the Propulsion of Panjandrumism, and Mr. Bleby, who, in addition to being saved, though a dissenter, was an admirable hairdresser and purveyor of Brombridge gossip, knew also the mark of the Beast, the hidden meaning of the sacred number 666, and the exact connection of the lost tribes of Israel with the leading families of England. So he began to stand somewhat in the light of spiritual shepherd to the lady whose social distance from him was so great that, though her luxuriant pale brown hair and fine head were in his clasp for an hour or two at a time, she would as soon have thought of giving him her white delicate hand, in a hand-shake, as of kissing the groom, or Dr. Slaney's dog Gemini.

So Mr. Bleby's position had of late stirred up a militant dislike of him in Mora ; and instead of sitting out the length of his stay, in pleased attendance, and, it must be confessed, enjoyment of his somewhat venomous gossip, for the last three or four times she had taken care to be out of reach when sent for by her mother with the intimation, 'Mr. Bleby has come.' On the occasion of the visit about to be recorded the hairdresser himself had supplied in a strictly deferential manner the reason of her non-appearance in these words : 'I don't think that Miss Mora cares about sacred conversation, and I'm afraid she goes too often to the Knoll for her soul's safety.'

Mrs. Uraine was quick-witted, and her dignity always regnant ; so she made no comment on the startling information thus given her, except to remark, as she pulled her white dressing-gown carefully from the danger of Mr. Bleby's foot—

'Miss Mora will never forget she is her mother's

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daughter, Mr. Bleby,' which was a deeper truth than Mrs. Uraine knew when she uttered it.

Mr. Bleby had only thrown out a feeler as to whether the mother was aware that an intimacy had sprung up between the two houses ; and shrewd and clever as he was, he was obliged to admit to himself that her answer had thrown no new light on the subject, and conveyed the slightest suspicion of a snub.

There are two people in the world whom one ought never to snub, viz. one's dentist and one's hairdresser, because of the obvious opportunities they possess for prompt retaliation.

Mrs. Uraine vaguely realised this for the next few minutes, but with her customary self-possession she merely remarked in a casual tone, 'You find my hair a little knotted this afternoon, I fear ; take your own time, Mr. Bleby,' which civility disarmed the little man's momentary irritation, and warning him off Mora's territory, as it were, caused him to take up his parable about the inquest, and Sellcuts', which was just what his client meant him to do.

'So Mr. Blake's housemaid is in prison, is she ?' said Mrs. Uraine thoughtfully ; 'do you think she'd been put up to it all by those people ?'

'It doesn't do to say,' replied Mr. Bleby, 'but I have my doubts it's a put-up job. The coroner may have had his reasons for shielding Mr. Blake, or he may not. I can't say. I did my duty in trying to show him up, but it wasn't of the slightest use. I was put down each time.'

'When does the trial come off ?' asked Mrs. Uraine.

'In a fortnight's time,' said the hairdresser briskly, 'and then we shall see what we shall see. I daresay

it'll end in Mr. Blake finding Brombridge too hot for him, and giving up the Knoll.'

'What a mercy that would be!' cried Mrs. Uraine, as she thought of how effectually it would put an end to her husband's evening visits to and from the Knoll. 'That woman of his gave evidence, I hear,' she continued coldly, as became a well-educated lady whose invincible virtue gave her the right to speak with abominable coarseness of another woman of whom she had heard a slanderous tale.

'Mrs. Blake, you mean,' replied Mr. Bleby, wincing, for even he had been somewhat moved by the scream 'that woman' had given, when, after testifying to her husband's goodness, she had left the Court unhinged, and stricken with an epileptic seizure.

'I have heard it said that they were married at a registry office,' he added apologetically.

'Oh well, that's nearly as bad as not being married at all,' replied the lady comfortably; 'it's another sort of Gretna Green.'

Now Mr. Bleby knew that though he had heard it said, it was not true, but he held his peace, and left unspoken the information he had gleaned, namely, that the marriage service had been held in the chapel of the hospital where Maggie Dukelle had lain ill so long, and which was specially licensed for the ceremony at Mr. Blake's expense, on which occasion the Sisters and patients had gazed on a most beautiful bride in a most beautiful bridal draping.

'They haven't caught the others yet, I suppose,' remarked Mrs. Uraine in a muffled voice, owing to the large towel with which Mr. Bleby was drying her hair from in front of her.

'No, and I don't expect they will,' rejoined the hairdresser significantly. 'Mr. Blake's got heaps of

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money, and it's so easy to keep people out of the way.'

'But what about the police, he can't bribe them?'

'I don't know about that. There's been a deal of money changing hands in past times over the doings of Sellcuts' and the Green Grapes. Hush-money it was, and though they do say as Mr. Ferrel, the publican put in by Mr. Blake, has been a decent sort, and the police have had no complaints, yet they're all tarred with the same brush, and the Ethiopian doesn't change his skin.'

'Well, we are told on divine authority,' replied Mrs. Uraine, yawning politely to indicate that the conversation must be changed, 'though hand join in hand yet shall not the wicked go unpunished. And now what have you to tell me about the Panjandrum meeting, Mr. Bleby?' So the talk grew, as the time wore on, more and more edifying, until Mora's voice sounded along the corridor, 'Hasn't he gone yet? Oh, then I can go out with you, Ted, to the fowl-house!'

'It's me she means,' said Mr. Bleby, who had long since finished his lady's hair, and was sitting with a Bible on his knee, open at the seventh chapter of Daniel, and a little tractate thereon just arrived from the Panjandrum headquarters in London in his hand.

'I must go now,' he said, rising hurriedly; and then, sinking his voice to a whisper, he said with a tragic expression of face, 'stop her going to the Knoll, ma'am, or you'll live to repent it.'

So Mr. Bleby gathered up his implements and departed, while Mora quickly answered her mother's summons to come to her at once.

'How many times have you been to the Knoll?' asked the latter quietly, after the usual courtesies had

been exchanged concerning the state of the invalid's hair, which same hair Mora very cordially admired, and was proud of it in a respectful, filial fashion.

Now this was an awkward question, and it came so unexpectedly that the girl had no time to hedge, and being by nature candid and truthful, was but a poor hand at unpremeditated lying.

'Several times,' she replied, colouring.

'Have you been there to-day?'

'Yes.'

'Were you there yesterday?'

'Yes.'

'And the day before yesterday, I suppose?'

'Yes.'

'Don't speak to me in that curt way, miss,' said her mother, suddenly opening fire on the unhappy culprit. 'It only shows what harm is done even to the outward manners by associating with a low class of people. So you have been deceiving me and pretending you were taking a walk with your father or brother, and all the while you have been disgracing yourself and me by frequenting a house whose very air is polluted? However, I shall take immediate steps for preventing any recurrence of such deception on your part; and, meanwhile, I forbid you to go to the Knoll, or to hold any communication with the wretched people in it.'

Now these words were bitterly hard on Mora, for both her father and brother had been quite as often to the Knoll as she, and had made a habit of dropping in at the end of their walks, in a free and easy fashion that had already developed feelings of warm and gratified fellowship on the part of Mr. Blake, and brought out some of the latent possibilities of Mrs. Blake's struggling and sorely handicapped intelligence.

'Mother!' cried Mora, as she rose up from her chair,

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trembling in every joint, while her voice rang with a new note of womanhood in it.

Mrs. Uraine was a little bit scared, it was so long since she had come into close quarters with a human will roused to fierce conflict with her own. Her family, Mora included, had been so submissive and docile in their demeanour, that the spectacle of her only daughter standing there before her, with her face deadly pale, and her large eyes blazing with passion and defiance, was of so tremendous a significance, that she had to pull all her forces together to keep the upper hand in this most unlooked-for tug-of-war.

Had Mora been eleven or twelve years old, she would have rung the bell and ordered the servant to bring her the little riding-whip that stood in the hat-stand in the hall, and Mora would have felt the smart of it for many a long day after, as she had done once before when she had played with her dolly all Sunday afternoon, her mother being unable to find her for the usual dose of Catechism, Collect, and Burder's Sermons which made life a burden for two Sabbath hours.

But summary treatment of that kind being out of the question now, Mrs. Uraine laughed with a cold exasperating laugh, and said—

‘No heroics, Mora, I beg. You are not with music-hall people at this moment; and never shall be again, if I can help it. Ring that bell, and go to your room for the rest of the evening. You will speak with no one, by my express orders.’

With hot haste Mora dashed out of her mother's room, and along the corridor to her bedroom, and locking the door, threw herself face downwards on her bed, and cried as she had never cried before in her life.

To be sure there had been one or two episodes in the past when her grief had been turbulent and

unmanageable,—such as when the Margetsons had as children gone to a Christmas party at Kingsboro' Castle, while staying at Brombridge Hall, and Mora was not allowed to go when Mrs. Uraine discovered there would be dancing, consequently the new white muslin frock and red sash had to be put away unworn, and the child sent to bed in disgrace for crying so loudly and persistently.

But now! Oh, there was so much more of her to weep with! The new music of *In Memoriam*, the new hunger for beauty, the luxury of admiration and affectionate kindness at the Knoll, and all it had meant during the last few weeks, had opened so many new doors in the house of her soul for emotion to rush forth at, so many new windows through which either sunshine of joy or dark shadows of sorrow could pour in.

There was so much to be hurt by in her mother's decision. It was not merely forbidding her a great pleasure which had given real interest and excitement to her hitherto tame and uneventful life; it was outraging her sense of justice in its brutal contempt for the Blakes, and it was wounding that most pure and chivalrous kind of love—which is the finest education of all that is finest in man or woman—the love of one who is helpless and afflicted.

Perhaps if Mrs. Uraine had been able to get out of the ridiculous unfairness of her conception of 'music-hall people,' and had let Mora be able to be confidential and candid about her touching friendship for Maggie Blake; if she had been on terms of chumminess with her own daughter, so that she were the first person to whom the heartbeats of her child were given, impending calamity would have been averted, and both have been saved a wholly unnecessary grief. If poor

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Mora, with her head against her mother's knee, had been able in the twilight of that cosy room to have told her of the new evangel that had come into her rather trivial life in the shape of a sisterly resolve to help Maggie's weakness with her strength ; of how, for the first time in her life, she had prayed a real prayer that God would let her love the beautiful girl back into sense and health, Mrs. Uraine herself would have been lifted on to a higher and nobler plane, would have learnt before it was too late to prevent catastrophe, that all theatrical folk are not so bad as some have been, and that Mr. Blake at least was a good man, and a gentleman in every sense of the word. She might also have been Mora's pilot through the rocks and shoals amid which the young sailor was putting out to the open sea, and so have crowned her divine right of motherhood, and saved her child from agonies of avoidable regret.

But alas, she had so fed her mind with platitudes, and beggared her heart of human emotion, that her intellect had only platitudes to offer her, in this time of emergency, and her starved heart was too faint to lift up its voice.

For a while she sat as one stunned ; and then, seeing the servant waiting, she pulled herself together, and said as unconcernedly as she could—

‘Where’s your master?’

‘He hasn’t come in yet, ma’am,’ replied Parker.

‘Tell Master Ted I want him,’ was the next order.

When Ted came into his mother’s room, he was utterly ignorant of the state of affairs, having just returned from a soul-stirring ride in Mr. Blake’s dog-cart from Kingsboro’. So he asked in his usual cheery voice, as he seated himself on the edge of the table—

‘Did you want me, mammy?’

'How often has Mora been to the Blakes', to your knowledge?' asked his mother more sternly than she meant.

'There's a row on,' thought Ted to himself, and her tone riled him a little; perhaps because he had had an unusually good time with his new friend Mr. Blake at the Castle, and Lord Clanbinder had been extremely kind to him, and given him a gun.

'As often as I have,' he replied diplomatically, hoping she would cut it short.

'How often is that?'

'Nearly every day,' said Ted, making a plunge. 'It's got to come,' he thought within himself again, 'it may as well come now, and have done with it.'

'Why have you gone there when you knew I objected to them so utterly?' and an angry light glistened in her eyes, for Ted was nearest of all to his mother's heart, or what she had substituted for it.

'Well,' replied Ted slowly, 'we found them to be so kind and nice, so different from what you think they are, we couldn't snub them even at first; and we knew you'd like them if only you got to know them. But you see, you abuse them so, directly we mention them, and you said they weren't married, and you know we never contradict you. But they are married all the same.'

Perhaps in all her life Mrs. Uraine had never felt so completely dumfounded, and she gazed on her handsome son with a consternation that took away all her power of speech.

Ted was still sitting on the edge of the table, marking purely imaginary patterns on the carpet with the toe of his boot, and looking as sulky and obstinate as it was possible for him to look. His hands were in his pockets, and there was an attitude of devil-may-care

about him that was wholly new to his mother, who had never seriously come in conflict with her son before.

At last she found her tongue, and her words trickled down like icy streams on Ted's burning ears, 'Upon my word, things have come to a pretty pass in this house! And pray has your father been aware of your and Mora's goings-on?'

'Wouldn't it be better to wait and ask father himself?' said Ted simply, with a single eye to not compromising his best-loved parent.

But to Mrs. Uraine the words conveyed an insinuation that Ted was not to be got at to split on his father's share in the evil intercourse that had been going on between the Knoll and the Hall; and they robbed her of the last rag of her somewhat tattered patience. Consequently the storm burst with such fury on her son's unprotected head, that he slid down from the table, gazed at his mother with open-eyed disgust, clapped his hands over his ears, and ran for his life, slamming her door behind him with a bang that shook the corridor.

But the bang roused his mother to action, and ringing the bell she summoned Parker to her presence. First she desired the latter to go and lock Miss Mora's bedroom door, and bring her the key.

'I do not wish you to speak a word to Miss Mora, or give any reason for doing so,' she said in her most imperial tone; 'if the key is inside, open the door, and take it out. You need give no explanation—Miss Uraine will perfectly understand.'

'I'm not going to let those two talk it over to-night,' she murmured as she waited for the key.

The obedient Parker, who had been consuming smuggled-in sausages at the sombre kitchen tea, was so relieved to find the smell had not reached the delicate

nose of the invalid, that she hurried off with extra cordiality to obey her mistress's order. The key being on the outside, all she had to do was to turn it, locking the door as she did so, and make her way back to the presence-chamber.

'That will also prevent her from getting at her father, who might be a little weak with her, before I have questioned him'; and Mora's mother laid the key on the mantelpiece. 'She's had a good tea, I have no doubt, and can easily go on to breakfast. A little wholesome hunger and solitude will help bring her to herself.'

Aloud to Parker she said, 'I want you to get out my black silk dress and best bonnet. I'm going across to the Knoll.'

Being much too well dragooned into the art of behaving yourself lowly and reverently before all your betters, Parker showed no surprise, but merely replied, 'Yes, ma'am,' and busied herself in opening lavender-scented drawers to get out the rarely-used visiting dress and bonnet aforesaid.

After her toilet had been completed, Mrs. Uraine remarked quietly in her ordinary voice, 'Go and put something on, I shall require you to accompany me.'

The inwardly astonished Parker flew off to do her bidding, only pausing for a moment at a bit of mirror-glass in the servants' sitting-room, to stick her tongue in her cheek and turn round to the cook and make such a face at her, as sent that worthy off into a paroxysm of smothered laughter.

Now as it happened, the Colonel and Mr. and Mrs. Blake were at dinner when James came and whispered to his master that a lady was waiting for him in the drawing-room, and wished to see him alone, as soon as he had done dinner.

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'I daresay it's Mrs. Paine,' said the master of the house, 'she won't mind waiting a few minutes.'

So all unconscious of the Damoclesian sword that hung over his head, the doomed man deliberately cracked and peeled one or two walnuts for his wife, drank his black coffee with due appreciation of its flavour, and rose from his chair in the leisurely fashion of one who has eaten a good dinner, in very good company, and is on peaceful terms with every one but his wife's relations.

With his napkin he flicked off a crumb that had fallen on his low-cut evening waistcoat, and as he stood at the door, with his shapely hand on the handle, smiling back at his wife, he said to the Colonel, 'Look after Maggie till I come back, or if I am detained, take her to the library.'

'All right!' cried the Colonel gaily, little recking of that awful accusing angel that sat waiting in the drawing-room.

'Mr. Blake?' questioned the lady, rising. 'I am Mrs. Uraine.'

'Mrs. Uraine!' he exclaimed, and he could say no more, for there was a declaration of war in her attitude, her voice, and the very fact of her visit.

So they stood face to face for a moment, silently taking each other's measure, she somewhat perturbed, it must be confessed, at the nobility and style of the man before her, the princely bearing of him, and the beauty of the room which made so fitting a background for its owner. He, astonished at the somewhat robust and commanding figure of the lady of whose invalidism he heard so much, was further amazed at the almost repellent good looks of his unexpected and unwelcome guest.

'Take a chair,' he murmured, not appearing to

notice the gloved hand which offered him two kid fingers to touch.

Another man would have said something conventionally polite about being glad to see her, and have made a pretence of being so ; but for all his associations with the world of acting and make-believes of the stage, Paul Blake was a very sincere man, and knowing by every token that the woman before him was uncompromisingly hostile, he made no sham effort at acting as if she were friendly.

Drawing a chair conveniently near to her, he sat down, and leaning one elbow along its straight back, he waited for her to open fire.

'I am surprised to find that my daughter has been visiting here,' she began coldly. 'It is without my knowledge, and entirely against my wishes.'

'I am sorry to hear that,' said Mr. Blake in a commonplace tone that expressed nothing.

'I've come to you to-night to beg that on no account will you allow her to enter your house again, or suffer any communication to pass between her and your wife,' said Mrs. Uraine, stammering slightly over the last words.

'Why ?'

'Because our walk in life is totally different. I do not approve of the theatre, and it behoves a Christian mother to select her children's acquaintances, with a view to guarding them from evil.'

'This is not a theatre,' said Paul, 'and the only people your daughter has met here are the Baptist minister and his wife, my dear wife and myself. What have you to say against us ?'

'Are you married ?' asked Mrs. Uraine with a slight superior smile.

Mr. Blake rose from his seat, and taking a frame

from the brocaded wall-panel, held it out before her, saying, 'That will tell you.'

The lady before him gazed in silence at a bridal scene, admirably photographed, a Gothic chapel, a score or more of white-capped sisters forming an avenue, down which, coming from the altar, walked Paul Blake with his beautiful bride decked in the snowy splendour of veil and train and orange-blossom.

'I had the place specially licensed for the ceremony,' he remarked.

'I must apologise,' faltered Mrs. Uraine, who felt as if the ground beneath her were giving way. 'I had been told you were not married.'

'But surely you did not believe it?' ejaculated the gentleman, and he said no more, but put the picture carefully back on the wall, coming again to his seat, and awaiting the next move.

All this while his visitor was feeling more and more in the wrong, and more and more unpleasantly uncertain as to coming off victor in the end.

In the quiet of her own room it had seemed so easy to put down the manager of *Sellcuts'*; sitting there with the enemy before her, it began to be horribly difficult.

'I am also desirous that my daughter should not be exposed to a bad example,' began the lady again; 'you do not deny that your wife drinks.'

'We are all strict teetotalers in this house—much more strict than you are; for, except in the safe, of which I alone have the key, there is not a bottle, barrel, or drop of any kind on the premises, and I never put it on the table even for guests, lest it should trouble my dearest wife, who had drink so often forced down her throat by a cruel father. I don't think Miss Mora misses her beer when she comes here, and believe me,'

said Paul, lowering his voice, 'she is far better without it.'

Now this was turning the tables on Mrs. Uraine, and Mr. Blake meant it as such; but she rallied again under the inspiration of a new objection.

'I've always selected my daughter's friends, Mr. Blake, from that class of society to which she belongs by right of birth, and in which her future lot will be cast, and as I mean to continue doing so, I've come to-night to put an end to an acquaintanceship begun and carried on in a clandestine way, and I'm sure if ever you had a mother you will own that I'm right.'

'I could hardly have come into the world without one,' replied Paul good-humouredly, for after all Mrs. Uraine was a trifle amusing, 'but I can't take upon myself to decide whether you are right or wrong. Your daughter has been here with her father's full knowledge, often with him or her brother, and I object to your calling it clandestine. In no sense has it been that.'

'Has she accompanied him here of an evening?' cried Mrs. Uraine with real dismay in her voice.

'Very often.'

Now Mrs. Uraine had refrained from interfering with her husband's visits for many reasons, and after his declaration of independence on that first night when the white kitten had taken Mora to the Knoll, she had ignored the subject altogether, accepting his 'I shall be out this evening, my dear,' with a degree of resignation in part due to the S.P.P., and the solitude necessary for devouring its, to her, interesting literature. But she had not known of Mora's accompanying him.

'They have deceived me,' she cried with real pain stirring her selfish heart.

'Listen to me,' said Paul Blake kindly; 'it is a mis-

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take to try and keep your family in leading-strings, it hinders them from stepping out straight and fearlessly. I tell you frankly it is doing your husband, daughter, and son a great deal of good to come here. You don't know, being contented to stay in the house for your health, how dull and irksome you make their life, by forcing them into the peaceful laziness and finicking trifling of yours. Your husband, as a man, needs friends of his own choosing. Your boy is a most amiable lad, but some bad girl will make an easy prey of him one of these days, if he does not leave home and train for some definite calling ; and last, but not least, it is a perfect sin to see a really beautiful girl with a fine intellect and two or three rare traits of character, ungainly in dress and appearance, ignorant to a sad degree, and literally spoiling for want of an object in life. My poor, wife with all her feebleness of brain, has taught Miss Mora several things she ought to have learnt long ago, and your daughter has been a very sweet and tender friend to Mrs. Blake. I'm sorry to hurt you,' said Paul, seeing that she had begun to cry into her pocket-handkerchief ; 'won't you take another view of the thing, and make it impossible for your family to have any reason for keeping their doings from you ?'

'They've deceived me, and it is unpardonable,' moaned his visitor ; but all the same something in Mr. Blake's very candid speech began to do her good, in spite of her pride, for she dried her eyes, and tried to reply sternly to him—

'You are very rude to speak of my child in that way. She is not so ignorant as you think. We paid for her schooling at Miss Mimsey's for many years, and then had a first-rate finishing governess for one year.'

'I do not think I am rude, I do not mean to be ;

but I think you have been wrapped up in cotton-wool so long, you cannot bear the truth. Let me be your friend, and point out some of the things that ought to be told you, and that probably your family are afraid to tell you for fear of making you ill.'

Mr. Blake had a coaxing and musical voice when he chose, and he had set his mind on the conquest of Mrs. Uraine. Accordingly, though unwillingly, lest it should be a falling from grace to do so, she began to feel herself soothed and flattered by the earnest and patient tone in which he spoke, and the way in which he was devoting his time to her. Being also not quite dead to all feminine instincts, her vanity whispered that this man, handsome and princely, so far removed from her preconceived notion of a mere music-hall man, was conciliating her ruffled spirit, and courting her goodwill.

Furthermore, there was a large bank of freysias in a majolica stand near, and their exquisite fragrance stealing with subtle and delicate tremblings to her brain, somehow reminded her of the grace and dignity men expect from ladies of good birth and pure lives.

So she called up something approaching a wintry smile into her cold face, and said : 'Would it not seem very odd for me to be ordering my conduct to my family at your direction, Mr. Blake ?'

'Does it matter what things seem compared with the importance of what they are?' he retorted, with that bewitching smile of his illumining his features with sudden enchantment.

'Dear me, he's very nice-looking, and he has such beautiful hands,' thought Mrs. Uraine ; but aloud she said rather inanely : 'We are told to provide things honest in the sight of all men.'

'Just so,' said her host, after he had puzzled a little

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over the aptness of the quotation, 'but I think an outsider can often point out weak places that those living among them cannot see, because they are accustomed to them. But now to the point from which we started, —you are displeased with your daughter for coming here ; you are afraid she will be contaminated by association with a low music-hall man and his wife ; and you fear that her social position as Miss Uraine will suffer in days to come, perhaps matrimonially, by her friendship with two people whose house and grounds are inconveniently near your own. Isn't that so ?' he continued, still smiling at her, and looking at her with all the directness of his strong soul going out through his kind, honest eyes.

Mrs. Uraine winced visibly. He had evidently heard of the way in which she was wont to speak of him, and he had stated her position with almost brutal frankness ; but with him sitting there in front of her, and the smell of the freysias stirring her better nature, she felt that she had somewhat altered her opinion since coming into contact with him.

'If I had known you,' she said deprecatingly, 'I should have had a better opinion of you. I shall never think so badly of you again as I have done until now.'

'I'm glad to hear you say so,' he replied simply. 'Half the cruelty in the world comes from judging people of whom we know nothing. My mother's favourite maxim is, "Think the best until you know the worst."

There was a brief silence for a few moments, Mr. Blake determining that his visitor should make the next move.

'I should like to see your wife,' she said quite humbly after a while.

'You will understand that her mind is in a very feeble condition after the terrible ordeal through which she went at the inquest,' he said; 'and please remember she is only nineteen.'

Then he left the room and went to the library, where he found the Colonel drawing pictures of the Persian kitten, now called Snowball, to the delight of Mrs. Blake, who was looking very lovely in her simple white muslin dress.

'Come with me, pet,' said her husband, 'I want to introduce you to the lady who has been with me all this time.'

'I think if you'll excuse me I'll go home,' said the Colonel; 'my wife will be wondering what has become of me.'

'Do, my dear fellow,' said the other with a twinkle in his eye, unmarked by his departing guest, 'and go out by the side door, away round by the back, as it is raining a bit.'

So the good Colonel departed, and Maggie Blake was led into the august presence of Mrs. Uraine.

Then a wonderful thing happened, for at the sight of the beautiful creature in white, who looked like a tall radiant lily, with a snowy human face framed in the brown gold of an autumn leaf, Mrs. Uraine put out her hand with all its fingers, and said—

'How do you do, Mrs. Blake, I hope you are quite well?'—finishing her words with an unexpected sob.

'Darling,' said Maggie's husband, still holding her hand, 'this lady is Mora's mother, Mrs. Uraine.'

Maggie was very shy, and her colour faded rapidly as she took her seat near her guest, but it had a good effect on the latter, for she began to prescribe various medicines for her, with much eloquence as to their

efficacy, and grew quite womanly and friendly with her in the process.

Meanwhile Mr. Blake stood looking on, half anxious, half amused. It was one of the humours of the whole situation that while the Colonel was stealing home by the back door his wife was entertaining the mistress of the Knoll—‘that woman!’—with an account of the triumph of cod-liver oil in the case of her children when they had whooping-cough.

By and by, however, Mr. Blake interposed, saying—

‘Now, my dear, it is bed-time for you; you must thank Mrs. Uraine for so kindly coming to see you, and go to bed.’

‘I am so glad to have seen you,’ said Maggie, rising; ‘please come again soon. May Mora come in to-morrow morning? She is going to make my kittie a basket.’

One fierce struggle in the region of Mrs. Uraine’s brain; and for a moment the sanctified and the county families seemed to rise up, an exceeding great army, and cry, ‘No, she may not!’ in awful and proper accents. Then a living heart-beat, and a lovely, white-robed girl chased the county families and the sanctified into the background.

‘Yes, my dear, she shall come,’ said Mrs. Uraine. So Paul Blake knew that he had managed Mora’s mother, in spite of herself; but if he realised his victory, no sign of triumph appeared in his grave face.

Next he escorted her home to her own hall door, and had the satisfaction of hearing her say: ‘I shall be happy to ask you in another time, Mr. Blake; but to-night has been an unusual exertion for me, and I must go straight to bed.’

Well pleased was Paul Blake with his work as he

departed homeward ; and he felt sorry to think the Colonel was not at hand to share in his jubilation.

'Poor old chap,' he mused, 'he had a near squeak. What a pity they are all so afraid of making her ill. She has the strength and enterprise of half a dozen ordinary women, I should say.'

## CHAPTER XI

### MORA LEAVES HOME

WHEN Mrs. Uraine entered her house she found her husband in a state of excitement greater than any she had ever seen him display before.

'You out, my dear!' he cried, 'what in the world does this mean? Where have you been?'

'I've been spending an hour or so at the Knoll, Henry,' she remarked quietly, but with great firmness. 'I am really quite charmed with the place.'

There was some humour in her after all, for she smiled as she said it.

'At the Knoll!' cried the Colonel, and his guilty conscience rushed into his face, turning him scarlet, and stopping further utterance. Did she know of his dining there? Was she then the lady Mr. Blake had left the table to see?

'Oh, you needn't be so surprised,' said his wife. 'It was my duty to see those people for myself, especially as Mora has confessed to her deceitful conduct in going there day after day without her mother's knowledge and permission.'

'She didn't mean to be deceitful,' said Mora's companion in sin; 'she met the Blakes by accident as it were, and by this time I am sure you are in a

position to judge what a pleasure these visits have been to her and to me.'

'I've no doubt,' retorted his wife drily ; 'all the same you ought to have told me.'

'Well, you see,' said the Colonel, 'you always spoke so contemptuously of the Blakes, and were so dead set against them, we did not dare mention them in your presence.'

'You ought to have dared,' she replied with a note of genuine vexation in her voice, for after all it is not pleasant to have it brought home to one that one has played the Turk to one's family, and she added, 'I have done nothing to make people afraid of me to that extent,' and she turned as if to go upstairs. 'It's cold here. Hasn't there been a fire ?'

'No,' said the Colonel, 'I suppose Mora and Ted haven't been using this room to-night.'

'Mora had orders to spend the evening in her bedroom,' said Mrs. Uraine severely. 'You see, Henry, it is a very serious thing, for her especially, to have been visiting without her mother's sanction.'

'It is a very serious thing for a girl of her age not to have her mother's escort,' replied her husband very gently. 'I make but a poor substitute, I know ; but she has nearly always been accompanied by me or her brother, and I don't think it is Mora who is most to blame in the matter.'

'Perhaps you think I am ?' retorted Mrs. Uraine, colouring a little, and drawing in the corner of her mouth, by which the Colonel knew a storm might be predicted.

'Well, it's done now and can't be undone ; only, if I were you, I would not stop her going to the Knoll. Mrs. Blake and she get on very well together,' and the Colonel gave his arm to his wife to help her upstairs.

She was feeling a little bit overcome after all

the excitement and tension she had undergone, and when she reached her room she sank into a chair and begged for a glass of wine in a voice so faint that her husband became suddenly alarmed, and rang the bell for Parker.

'She's overdone it—I said she would,' said Parker, and for the next hour there was much wringing out of hot flannels, and various rubbings of cold feet and hands, until at last the patient pronounced herself better, and was tucked up carefully with a hot-water bag to her feet, a dose of weak brandy-and-water 'in her inside,' as Parker described it, and a Panjandrum tract on the table at her bedside in case she should wake in the night and need intellectual propping-up.

'Send Mora to me directly after breakfast,' she said, 'and when I have forgiven her I must have a talk with Ted.'

When he had assured himself that his wife was settled down for the night, the Colonel went back to the Knoll to glean what he could from Sellcuts' manager as to the result of his wife's visit, and the two men sat chatting over the very unexpected event of the evening till far on into the small hours.

As for Ted, after leaving his mother to go and pour out his angry feelings into Mora's ear, he found his sister in the turret-room, wholly unable to think of any grief but her own, so he shut himself up in his untidy little den, and tried to drown his woes in reading up all about guns, ancient and modern, until the pangs of hunger and the chiming of the staircase clock drove him downstairs to his frugal and lonely supper. Then he went to bed, and feeling very sore at his mother's treatment of him, contented himself with calling out, 'Good-night, mother,' as he passed her door, without waiting for her usual reply of, 'Good-night, my son,'

lest she should call him in and give him another dose of the nagging he so much hated.

He also said 'Good-night' at Mora's bedroom door, and receiving no answer, concluded she was asleep.

After Mora's first anguish of bitter crying had somewhat subsided, she bethought her of the little birthday book Mr. Blake had given her, and how it would be a comfort to have it in her hand, even if the light were too dim to admit of her reading it.

So she stole softly along the corridor and up the narrow stairs to the turret-room, and began to hunt about in the dark for her treasure, all her brain in a whirl of mingled passion and misery.

Her hat and jacket lay on the little sofa, where she had thrown them down when she came in from the Knoll, and her pocket-handkerchief was on the table covering over the birthday book, smelling sweet and luxuriously of Maggie Blake's favourite scent.

Alas, the perfume recalled the deep and tremulous joy associated with it, and her mother's stern prohibition, and once again she flung herself on her knees in another helpless passion of crying.

'I must see Maggie again,' she cried in the blind pain of a new love cruelly wounded. 'I can't live without her! Oh, who will help me? Who will turn mother's heart to pity? Father is afraid of her, and Ted can't. Mr. Carmichael would only say, "Children, obey your parents," and tell me it will all come right in the end. Dr. Slaney is of no use; he says she mustn't be worried. But oh, Maggie! Maggie!'

Then she cried long and violently again, and then rose from her knees and looked down from the turret on the now dear and familiar windows of the Knoll.

'There's a light in the drawing-room,' she murmured.

'I daresay father is there. But am I never to be there again ?'

Then a sudden thought crossed her mind, and made her heart leap with a great bound of hope—'Aunt Margetson !' Why yes, of course. Had she not put a warm, comfortable arm round Mora's waist the last time she visited Brombridge Hall, and kissed her in the most motherly fashion, whispering, 'My bairnie, if ever you need a friend come to me.'

'I'll write to her,' cried the girl. 'She'll take my part, I know. She doesn't look down on theatre people. She has some of the actors and actresses to her parties, I know.'

Thus cheered a little by the thought of her aunt in London, Mora turned from the dark landscape, and began to hunt again about the tiny room for her book ; in doing so she also found her purse, which she mechanically put into her pocket.

'I must go and get a candle from my bedroom,' she said to herself, the search proving unsuccessful in the dimness ; so down the stairs she went again, noiselessly reaching the bedroom, and, turning the handle, found, to her amazement, that it was locked, and the key had gone.

'What does it mean ?' cried the poor child. 'Does mother know ? Is it her doing ?'

Creeping softly down the back stairs lest her mother should hear, she met Parker carrying up some water.

'Parker, where's the key of my door ?' she articulated faintly.

'You're ma's got it,' replied Parker in an important voice, not at all sorry to seize the opportunity of making the daughter of the house feel small ; 'the door was locked by her orders, and she've put the key away.'

Mora made no reply, but with a sudden inward rebound from passionate grief to still more passionate indignation, ran swiftly up to the turret-room, put on her hat and jacket, found the little book, which she thrust into the bosom of her dress, and bending over the white kitten in its cradle for a moment, once more stole softly down the back stairs, making her way to the morning-room.

Once there, where there was a lamp, she felt her eyes so stiff and dazed with crying, she could hardly see to open the drawer where the blotter was kept. However, they served her well enough for her to write in a dreadfully shaky hand :—

‘DEAREST FATHER—I can’t bear it. Mother says I am never to go to the Blakes’ again, and she has locked me out of my own bedroom and disgraced me before all the servants. I am going to Aunt Margetson. My love and kisses to you and Ted, and the Blakes. Give my kitten back to Mr. Blake, please.—Your broken-hearted girl,  
MORA’

Then she looked round the room to see where she could put the note where Parker and the cook would not see it in the morning. Her father made the coffee every breakfast-time, so she placed it in the coffee canister.

‘Is there a train to London?’ said a shy voice at the ticket window of the Brombridge booking-office.

‘There’ll be one in twenty minutes,’ was the reply.  
‘What class, please?’

‘Second,’ said the shy voice.

There was no one in the carriage besides herself; and Mora sat in a kind of stupid dream as the train rushed on. Alas! it was now that the ill effects of her upbringing were showing themselves in all their worst aspects.

If only her mother had been her trusted companion, instead of a sometimes dreaded dictator, she would have gone to her to ask what was the meaning of the locked door. If only she had been taught, as all girls ought to be, why home is such an ark of safety, and a lonely girl away from home at night in such desperate danger, especially if she is good-looking, she would not have been able to take so rash and foolish a step as she was taking in going to her aunt by night, and at a minute's notice.

If, also, she had been allowed to mix a little more with other people, she would have reflected that her aunt might not be at home; or that her house might be full of company, and an unexpected visit most unwelcome.

If, too, her emotions had been properly directed into happy and useful channels; if music, dancing, games, innocent merriment, and work for those less well placed than herself, had provided her with a wholesome outlet for the rare qualities that had hitherto, until the Blakes woke them, slept a dreamless sleep in her unrecognised strength of character, she would not so suddenly have gone down in a storm of angry disappointment, but would have been able to take a fairer view of her mother's position as well as her own.

The train was a very slow one, and after hanging about every inconsiderable station on the line, it crept casually into Victoria about two o'clock in the morning.

'Any luggage, miss?' cried a porter, opening the door, and letting in a cold and sooty-smelling blast as he did so.

'No, thank you,' replied Mora, stepping down carefully, and feeling very chilly and scared for a few minutes, as she stood looking about her in an uncertain and childish manner.

'Was yer expectin' some one to meet yer?' asked the porter, somewhat uncertain how to place the young person in a brown felt hat of old-fashioned shape, with its distinguishing feature of a very long, handsome black feather, a skimp, fawn-coloured alpaca skirt, and nondescript brown jacket.

'She speaks like a lidy, but she ain't dressed like one,' he remarked to his pal, as Mora, after shaking her head, passed along with the rest of the humanities who had come by the dawdling train.

'How far is it from here to Grosvenor Place?' she asked of an inspector, who eyed her from head to foot with undisguised amazement.

'It's half-a-mile pretty near,' he answered. 'Are you going there at this time of day?'

'I was thinking whether I'd better stay in the waiting-room till later. The servants won't be up yet,' said Mora, feeling she must talk to some one, and this man looked kind.

'Well, look here,' he said, 'it'll be better for you to sit in the waiting-room, though I don't think there's a fire there. You'd only have to walk up and down, with the policeman taking stock of you all the time, for the next four or five hours.'

So he led her to the third-class waiting-room, and advised her not to come out again, or let any one know she was there.

'You just get a nap,' he said, roughly but kindly, 'and I'll come and call you at six, or thereabouts.'

Mora thanked him faintly, and began to realise in a dim kind of way that there were reasons why he did not wish her to be seen there. 'Perhaps people are not allowed to wait in these rooms at night,' she reflected.

'I wonder what's the story there?' mused the in-

spector, as he walked slowly away. 'She's not a bad one. She doesn't speak like a servant-girl. Grosvenor Place? She may be what they call a lady-help. I'll bet she's not a lady's-maid—she's too dowdy for that. Maybe she's a governess.'

Fortunately he was a good man, a religious one, and married; so when he had seen the last of the passengers out of the station, and the cabbies in waiting for the next train had settled inside their various vehicles for a much-needed forty winks, he went back to the waiting-room, and found Mora sitting in a chair, with her elbow resting on the table.

'Would you like a cup of tea, miss?' he said; 'I'm going to have one soon.'

'Oh yes,' cried Mora, eagerly. 'I am so dreadfully cold,' and her teeth chattered as she spoke.

'Poor thing. I reckon she's hungry as well,' said the good Samaritan.

'I say, Joe, make us some tea, sharp!' he said, looking in at the door of the porters' room, where Joe sat warming his feet at a roaring fire, 'and try your hand at cutting some thin bread-and-butter.'

'All right!' cried Joe. 'Who's the thin for?'

'Never you mind,' returned the other good-humouredly, 'it's not for you anyhow'; and he went off again.

'I say, Jumble,' he said, holding out some coppers to a miserable-looking man who stood leaning up against the entrance to the station yard, 'go to the barrow and get some of their ginger-cakes, will you.'

So Jumble hobbled off; and, giving a wistful look, first at the three coppers and then at the closely shut public-house at the corner, brought what was understood to be three-pennyworth, and, with unusual

honesty, handed them intact to the inspector, who was waiting for him.

'You haven't taken any?' said the latter, peering scrutinisingly into the bag. 'Well, then, here's a copper to go and get something for yourself.'

By and by the waiting-room door opened again, and Mora's new friend came in bearing a large cup of hot tea in one hand, and a plate of thin bread-and-butter and ginger-cakes in the other. He was followed by Joe, who speedily went down on his knees before the cold grate, and, boisterously clearing out the half-burnt coals with his hand, proceeded to lay in paper and wood; and taking a box of matches from his pocket, lit the pile, and a most welcome flare rewarded his labours.

'I'd ought to 'ave arst yer to light 'em with your eyes, miss,' he remarked, with a feeble attempt at gallantry, to Mora, the inspector having gone for some milk.

'None of your fooling, Joe,' said the latter gruffly, re-entering at the moment; 'this one isn't one of your sort, you turnip-head,' he continued, as they left the waiting-room together. 'I wonder you hadn't the sense to see it?'

'How was I to know?' grumbled Joe. 'They're all alike them as are out this time of day.'

The tea was very acceptable, though half the sugar was wasted by the slopping over into the saucer, where the inspector had put three lumps. The bread and butter had a distinct taste of the smell of Joe's clothes, as Mora had smelt them when he was kneeling before the fire,—a smell of lamp-oil, tobacco-smoke, and corduroy; but the girl was famished, and she ate every bit, and also the gingerbreads. After the meal she began to feel less crushed, so she stood up by the now cheerful fire, and warmed her aching feet.

“There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will,” she repeated to herself, and then she began to picture what her aunt and cousins would say, and especially Harry, of whom she had seen more than of the others.

At last another train arrived ; and soon the door was burst violently open, and some very noisy men and women came in.

‘You come out of this,’ said the inspector, who had followed them, to Mora’s great relief. ‘This is the ladies’ room. Out you go.’

‘What if I say I shan’t?’ said one of the young men impudently.

‘You won’t say it a second time,’ replied the inspector coolly ; and taking him by his sleeve he jerked him out on to the platform, and the rest bundled out after him,—all talking and scolding together.

Two of the women, however, remained behind, and they drew up their chairs to the fire, and began to warm themselves in its cheerful heat.

‘It must be getting on for six,’ said one. ‘The busses’ll be running for North Street, I guess, by now. But what a night it’s been !’

Then they fell to talking about the club, at which they had been performing in Didley ; and Mora gathered from what they said that they belonged to a theatrical company who had been giving an entertainment there.

At first she listened to all their complainings of what they’d had to put up with, with but scant interest. But when one of the young ladies threw back her head and exclaimed—

‘It wasn’t so under Paul Blake’s management, I can tell you !’ she pricked up her ears, and felt all the blood rushing to her face.

'No indeed,' echoed the other, 'that it wasn't!'

After that they began to discuss the Camelot Theatre and its manager, and the cast of *Mephistopheles*, and last, but not least, the burning down of Sellcuts', and the disappearance of the Dukelles.

'I don't know whether you'd like to be going now,' said the inspector, coming in again; 'it's after six o'clock.'

Now, Mora would like to have sat there longer, but being an unsophisticated traveller, she thought that most likely the inspector considered she had been there long enough, and feeling very grateful to him, she did not wish to offend him.

So she rose quickly and asked him to show her the way to Grosvenor Place.

'Hadn't you better take a bus?' he said. 'You don't look up to much walking, though, to be sure, it isn't very far.'

But Mora preferred walking; and, holding out a shilling, she begged him to let it pay for the tea.

'I hope it's enough,' she faltered; 'you've been so kind. I can't pay for that.'

'Oh! it's nothing, miss,' he rejoined; 'I don't want paying. You go and do the same for some one else, next chance you get. Pass it on, that's my motto; so it gets a chance of going round.'

Before very long Mora was standing at the door of the stately house in Grosvenor Place. She pulled the visitors' bell once or twice and waited a long time, but nobody seemed stirring.

At last, after a tug given with all her might, she heard a door bang, and then a dog bark, and, lastly, a sound of shuffling feet.

The handsome door was opened half-way by a young girl with a tow-sled head of hair, and a large cloak round her.

'What do you want?' she said, eyeing Mora with a sudden wide-awake suspicion.

'Is my aunt, Lady Margetson, awake?' said Mora, with a swift loathing of the towsled one.

'That's a good 'un,' hee-hawed the girl, bursting out into a loud laugh; 'my aunt, Lady Margetson, indeed! What next? You'll be inquiring after Mr. Harry, "my cousin," next, I suppose.' And she minced her words in a supposed imitation of Mora.

'This is Lady Margetson's house, isn't it?' cried Mora, wondering if she had made a mistake.

'Yes, it is,' said the girl brutally; 'but it's too early in the day to be leaving cards, so you best try somewhere else.'

'Please go up to Lady Margetson and tell her her niece, Miss Mora Uraine, wants to see her at once,' said Mora.

'Sorry I can't oblige you. But they're all out of town, except Mr. Harry,' said the girl mockingly.

'Out of town!' exclaimed Mora, in so heartrending a voice that the girl said in a kinder tone—

'Gone to Italy for the winter. They went a fortnight ago. Mr. Harry is going to join them to-day.'

'Let me come in and sit down somewhere,' said Mora almost in a whisper. 'I'll wait till he comes down to breakfast.'

'You stand here while I go and ask mother,' said the girl, closing the door and pointing to the large mat.

If Mora's ears could have penetrated to the butler's pantry, which the caretaker had made her bedroom, she would have heard the following brief dialogue through the carefully bolted door:—

'Mother! There's a person waiting in the hall says she's Lady Margetson's niece. Looks rumly dressed.'

Wants to sit and wait till Mr. Harry comes down to breakfast.'

'Oh, the hussy! It's some swindler, you may be sure. No! She can't wait here. Tell her to call again at ten, after he's had his breakfast. That'll settle her, I'll be bound.'

And so it did.

'You'd best go and wait in the Park,' said the girl impudently—because swindlers are not to be treated with common humanity. 'You'll find some seats there. You can come back at ten.'

'Just give this to Mr. Harry when he comes down,' said Mora, who had torn the blank leaf out of her birthday book, and written on it with a tiny silver pencil—

'DEAR HARRY—I'm in great trouble. Don't go out till I come at ten.—Your affectionate cousin,

'MORA URAINE.'

'Well, I'm blessed if I don't think she's his cousin after all,' said the tawny girl as she watched Mora go slowly up the street towards the Park.

About nine o'clock or so Harry Margetson's plain but kindly face was beaming with the satisfaction of coming breakfast, and the delicious odour of the coffee the caretaker had placed on the dining-room table.

'There's been a queer sort of person here this morning,' she said, placing the little slip of paper on the table by his plate. 'She came here about seven or so, asking to see her aunt, Lady Margetson. Lizbeth opened the door. She didn't like the looks of her. I sent up to say she could call again at ten. I thought you could be out of the way by then.'

Harry's head being full of the coming journey to Rome, where he was to join his mother and sisters, he

was not particularly interested in what the woman was saying ; but he took up the little piece of paper, read it, and then fairly frightened both the mother and daughter out of their senses.

‘Good heavens !’ he cried, bringing his fist down on to the table with a bang that made the china rattle. ‘Oh, you infernal fools ! Which way did she go ? Why the devil didn’t you come to me ? Get my boots, you dunder-headed idiot, you !’ he roared at Lizbeth, whose spiteful smirking during her mother’s speech had given place to direst consternation.

Both mother and daughter flew as if a cyclone had caught them ; and the young man marched to and fro, execrating them, and all their kind, in language wrung out of him by the horror of the situation.

When his boots were on, he tore up to Hyde Park Corner, and nearly knocked down several unoffending people in his quest of Mora.

She was nowhere to be seen ; but he descried a park-keeper, and plunged over the wet grass in pursuit of him.

‘Have you seen a young lady sitting or walking about by herself during the last hour or so ?’ he shouted breathlessly in the rear of the swift-footed walker.

‘There’s been a young lady took off to St. George’s Hospital,’ said the man, turning round to look at his interviewer. ‘She’d fainted or something or other, and two policemen have taken her in a cab.’

‘My God !’ said the young man, the hot tears rushing to his eyes with pity and indignation ; but he slipped a shilling into the park-keeper’s hand, whereupon the other one handed him a little book. ‘She must have dropped it,’ he said. ‘I found it by the seat where she had been sitting.’

Harry Margetson opened it, and scanned the writing on the fly-leaf. 'Thank you! That's hers,' he said with a choking voice, and turned away.

Then he hailed a hansom at the gate, and drove to the casual entrance of the hospital.

It seemed such a time before any one would give him any information, that at last he went off to the secretary's office, and from thence was taken to interview the house surgeon on duty in the receiving-room.

'She seems to be suffering from collapse at present,' said the doctor, 'her pulse is small, and her pupils are dilated. There are no marks of injury so far as I can judge until she is undressed and in bed.'

'I wish she could have been removed to our house,' groaned Mr. Margetson. 'But every one is away. My mother and sisters are in Rome. My father and eldest brother are in Scotland, where I left them only yesterday. Our servants are away on board wages; and there is only a caretaker in charge.'

So a cosy corner in a ward was set apart for the unconscious girl, who was carried up to it by two stalwart porters, the exodus from the receiving-room to the ward being superintended by a very charming nurse, who assured Mr. Harry that his cousin would be far better off in the hospital than in his house.

'I must telegraph to her father, Colonel Uraine, as quickly as possible,' said the young man, when the surgeon came down to him in the private room where he had waited. 'What shall I say? You see I know nothing of the facts—why she is up in London, or where she has come from. I only know her mother is a woman with views, and disagreeable to a degree.'

'Is she engaged? Is it likely to be a love affair?' asked the surgeon, turning his back on his visitor, ostensibly to look for something in a drawer.

'By Jove, I hope not!' cried Harry Margetson, with so much decision that his listener immediately drew his own conclusions. 'I beg your pardon,' he went on more quietly, 'I hardly know what I'm saying. But you see her mother's such a born ass, and—and—I've had no—breakfast,' and the next moment he had turned deadly white, and was soon lying flat in a dead faint on the surgeon's sitting-room floor.

'Poor beggar,' said the doctor to himself. 'No, you don't,' he said a short while after, when Harry was protesting he must go and send off the telegram. 'You stay and take a bite with me—I'm going to have my breakfast at once—or we'll have you on our hands next. I'll write the message; it will be taken safely enough by a porter.'

This was the message to Mora's father—

'Mora is with me—ill. Come up at once.—Margetson.'

'That will break the brunt of the shock,' said Harry; 'he'll think it's mother, poor old boy.'

During the course of breakfast, a nurse came down to say that the young lady was ready for the doctors; and that she had not opened her eyes yet, but had moaned once or twice while being undressed.

'Don't spare any expense,' said Harry at parting; 'let her have the best of everything, and if there is anything I can do, for heaven's sake let me do it.'

'Poor beggar,' muttered the surgeon again within himself; but aloud he replied,—'All right. I'll send you word of how she gets on.'

It was almost a joyful relief to get back to Grosvenor Place, and give Lizbeth the savagest blowing-up she had ever experienced, and doubtless she deserved all that Mr. Harry Margetson said to her, and more.

'If my mother were here you'd get the sack, both of you,' he said, as he retired to his smoking-room to light a pipe and study time-tables with a view to finding out what time he might expect the Colonel.

'He will be at Victoria at 1.30,' he said to the crestfallen Lizbeth who answered his ring. 'Tell your mother to have a decent lunch ready for three, in case he brings my cousin with him,' he called after her.

Next he had to devise a careful telegram to Rome, explaining that they must not expect him for a day or two, and after taking it to the office, he directed his steps to the hospital.

The house surgeon was a very kind-hearted man; and was by no means surprised to see the patient's male cousin on the scene again.

He had once been in love himself; but the object of his affection having proved utterly worthless, he had forsaken the vanities of youth, and dedicated himself soul and body to his profession. Nevertheless he had human weakness enough left in him to fancy he could read the riddle of Harry Margetson's anxiety in the light of his own experience.

'It would seem as if she were suffering from shock of some kind,' he said to his visitor; 'there are no signs of injury, or maltreatment of any sort. She has spoken once in a whisper, and swallowed some milk.'

'What did she say?' asked the young man, trying to speak carelessly.

'Oh, she mentioned your name, but didn't get any farther.'

There was a little silence, and then the visitor spoke with an effort—

'If she should ask for a book she dropped, tell her I have it. Won't you come to lunch so as to meet her father, my uncle Uraine? He'll want to hear all about

her. I can't make out what has happened, but I expect he'll be awfully cut up.'

'I hope her mother won't take it into her head to come too,' thought he, as he stood waiting on the train to come in.

In a little while after this he was shaking hands with the Colonel and Ted, both of whom looked ill and unhappy to a degree. Also, there was a third member of the party, who stood by, evidently waiting to be introduced.

'This is my nephew, Mr. Blake,' said Mora's father. 'Harry, this is our dear friend and next-door neighbour, Mr. Paul Blake, of the Knoll.'

Harry shook hands as in duty bound ; but something made him less cordial of manner than was his wont.

'He's confoundedly good-looking,' he thought, 'and no end of a swell. Who is he, I wonder, and how comes he to be playing third in the family party at such a time ?'

With characteristic withholding, they all got into the carriage Harry had chartered from the livery stables, the family ones being down at their place in the country ; and not a word was said about Mora until they had reached the safe solitude of the library, where, as briefly as possible, Harry told his part of the story. Then the Colonel recounted his, during the recital of which certain episodes removed the younger man's momentary coldness to Mr. Blake, and caused him to get up and shake his guest heartily by the hand.

'She must have left the house while your aunt was out,' continued the Colonel in a low voice, 'and God knows what might have befallen her, if she had not kept that one thought of coming up to stay with your mother before her mind.'

'Is aunt Uraine much cut up?' asked Harry, hoping that she might be, at any rate.

'We haven't told her the whole truth yet,' said Mr. Blake; 'she is wholly unaccustomed to perturbation or excitement; so your uncle got me to tell her as unconcernedly as I could, that Miss Mora had gone up to her aunt's by the evening train, and we thought it best not to tell her about the tragic little letter the Colonel found in the coffee canister. She is more angry than grieved, and at present it is safer she should be. The grief will come soon enough.'

'I want a word with you, uncle,' said Harry, pulling him back, as they rose at the sound of the lunch-gong.

When Ted and Mr. Blake had gone, the younger man stuck his hands into his pockets. 'Uncle,' he said solemnly, 'is there any love affair at the back of this?'

'No, no!' cried the Colonel, and he looked a little less unhappy; 'not a thought of such a thing, I am glad to say. No, the simple fact is your aunt has kept too tight a hand over her, and Mora has fretted over it much more than I knew. It was the forbidding her to see Mrs. Blake again that brought about the final explosion.'

'What is Mrs. Blake like?'

'Exquisitely beautiful, and not quite all there,' replied the Colonel simply.

'You've lifted a weight from my mind,' remarked the young man with absolute truthfulness. 'It's a shame to have tormented Mora, she's such a nice girl. She would be almost a beauty if she were decently dressed.' But he forgot for the moment that he was speaking to Mora's father.

'I think her mother intends to treat her very differently in the future,' put in the older man deprecatingly.

'She'll have to,' said Harry vindictively.

After lunch they all went to the hospital. There they were met by the intelligence that Mora had regained consciousness, and had asked for her father.

'You must be very calm,' said the doctor; 'she isn't in a condition to bear any excitement.'

But at sight of that beloved face Mora gave a cry of joy, and was soon leaning her head on her father's arm, and kissing even the lapel of his coat with ecstasy of comfort. 'My dearie, my daddy,' she crooned to him. 'Oh, I've been so far from you! How could I have left you?'

'It's all been a mistake, my darling,' he said, and a tear fell on to Mora's face that was not her own. 'I ought to have known better than to let you run the risk of so displeasing your mother.'

'How has mother taken it?' asked Mora, with a feverish brightness in her large eyes.

'My dear, you mustn't excite yourself,' said her father, 'but your mother went to the Knoll last night, and she's given in. Blake managed her.'

'Mother went to the Knoll!' cried Mora, forgetting her weakness. 'Oh, why wasn't I more patient? How stupid of me. If I'd waited it would have come all right—

"There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will."

And now I've spoilt it all by doing such a mad thing.'

'I don't think she must talk so much,' said the kindly nurse, looking round the screen with a smile.

'Mr. Blake and Ted are downstairs with Harry,' said the Colonel.

'Give them all my dear love,' said Mora, 'and come in as soon as you can. I should like to send a message to Maggie.'

'You shall give it to Mr. Blake yourself,' said her father, anxious to humour his darling at the first opportunity. 'I'll send him up.'

She had not long to wait. He came up to her bedside bringing some most exquisite roses, and, bending over her, kissed her lightly on the brow, and laughed a gentle, low laugh as he piled the roses on her sheet, so that they caressed her mouth and cheeks, saying, 'You silly little idiot, you! Why did you run so far when you had a home close by?'

How kind it was of him to put it in that way, for, knowing what a particular man he was, the young prodigal had dreaded lest he should show her that she had fallen in his esteem.

'Give me a nice message for your mother,' he said. 'I shall go in and see her as soon as I get back.'

'Are you sure that she will see you?' asked Mora, remembering the inhospitality of his reception on a former visit.

'Your mother has prescribed cod-liver oil for my wife, and shaken hands with us both in our own drawing-room,' replied the manager. 'What more can you want? Good-bye. Do as they bid you. Come back to us soon, and don't rough-hew your ends more than you can help,' he added, looking back at her as he walked away.

So Mora, murmuring something to herself about the divinity being sometimes human, fell asleep with the roses lying around her, and her last thoughts of her father and Paul Blake, but none of Harry Margetson.

## CHAPTER XII

### 'WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK'

'I TELL you they don't catch me letting myself in for such a fraud as that Didley affair again in a hurry,' said Miss Colani to her friend as they stood waiting to come on in the second act of *Mephistopheles*.

Stuart Mackay had not yet finished calling spirits from the vasty deep, and other inconvenient places, to aid him in the destruction of the heroine, so there was a little time for a continuation of the unfinished conversation overheard by Mora Uraine at Victoria Station.

'To think of going down from London to perform for forty guzzling pigs who'd eaten so much they could hardly see out of their eyes, and were too tipsy to clap decently. I can't think how Charlie Simpson came to let us go,' and Miss Colani tossed her head with strong disapprobation of the 'pigs' aforesaid.

'No more don't I,' chimed in Miss Cora Montague, otherwise Mrs. Stuart Mackay. 'Next to nothing to eat and drink, and only one dressing-room between eight ladies, and the gentlemen nearly as badly off! I never was in a worse one than ours. How it smelt! And as damp and cold as a well.'

'And to think of that odious little beast who would

make a speech, thanking the Club for the entertainment it had provided.'

'Such cheek! I don't think the Didley orphans will get much out of our trouble on their behalf. Poor little mites.'

'I told Charlie the letter was rot,' said Jane Elizabeth crossly, 'but he wouldn't take my advice. It said that his sainted father—now in heaven—was born and brought up as a Didley boy, and was married in the parish church, and that under those circumstances he—Charlie, you know—would doubtless like to give a representation of *Mephistopheles* for the benefit of the orphanage, on behalf of which the Mutual Enjoyment Club was going to give a dinner, the Club to pay all out-of-pocket expenses, and the cast to give their services free, gratis, for nothing, and nice and cheap at that. Why, what do you think the cheque was they handed Dickie Carter?'

Miss Montague hazarded a guess.

'Lord, no! I only wish it had been half that. For thirteen of us, remember, with return tickets costing twelve-and-six, third class, quite apart from the carriage of the properties,—seven guineas! Did you ever hear of such meanness? However, I told Charlie he's got to write and keep them to their promise. He's too thin-skinned by half.'

'He wants a wife that'll be a sort of backbone for him,' said Miss Montagne, with a knowing wink.

'He's late to-night,' replied Miss Colani, setting down the basket of paper flowers with which, as it hung on her artless arm, she was to win the heart of the ducal hero as he rode over her while out hunting in a flowery meadow with the hounds in full cry, and the girl picking flowers, all unconscious of their presence.

'Ah, now he's got to that lovely line, "As cold and

clammy as the bootless fog"—it ought to be frog, I'm certain. 'Good-bye for the present,' and Beatrice glided softly into the limelit meadow to pick up paper blossoms, and explain in reassuring tones that she was but sixteen yesterday, and a young and tender 'cheild' at that.

'You're an uncommon fine-grown one then!' shouted a stalwart admirer in the gallery, who was one of the regulars at the Camelot.

'Simpson's ill,' remarked Stuart Mackay to his wife as he took off his diabolian mask, 'but don't tell Jinny till we're through. Carter got a wire to say he's bowled over, and can't come to-night.'

'Jinny'll be in an awful state. She dotes on him. What's the matter with him?'

'He's been seedy for some time. He's not strong, and I don't think that old skinflint of a landlady of his feeds him properly. He's gone thinner ever since he went there after his mother's death.'

'Why doesn't he marry Jinny?' remarked Miss Montague, 'and let her take care of him.'

'He let out to me one night that she uses such strong language he's sometimes afraid of her.'

'What a chicken-hearted chap he is! Strong language 'ud help him on a bit, I'm thinking. There's no harm in Jinny's bad words as she means them. She has a sharp tongue, and she's down on you like a ton of coal, if she's in the mood; but she's just as kind-hearted as she can be.'

'She'll be going to see him, and then there'll be a devil of a row with Mrs. Best. I hope I'll be on hand to see the fun,' said 'Mephistopheles,' adjusting his headgear once more.

At last the play came to an end, and Miss Colani stood holding the telegram Mr. Carter had shown her.

'I must go and see him,' she said. 'But I'd rather some one went with me. Can't you take me with you to-morrow morning?'

This was to Dickie Carter, who was a staid, and gray, and rather surly old man. 'Yes. If you promise to behave yourself,' he said.

So Miss Colani undertook to be on her best behaviour, and went home alone feeling that the beauty of this world, or at any rate the walk from the Camelot to her lodgings, depended very much on whether you had some one you like to walk it with you, or whether you had to walk it alone.

'Oh, I'm dead beat! Give me some beer at once, or I shall die!' she cried, dropping down into her chair in the familiar room.

The blind woman poured her out some without spilling a drop, and handed it to her in silence, knowing better than to offer Jane Elizabeth any sympathy until her bodily wants had been supplied.

'It's tripe, my dear,' she remarked after a while, during which she knew as well as if her eyes had seen, that Jane Elizabeth was crying.

'So it is,' said the latter cheerfully, 'some of it would do Charlie Simpson good. He's ill. He hasn't been there to-night.'

Now the blind woman had guessed that something had gone wrong with Charlie, for true love is like a cough, there's no keeping it quite to yourself.

'What's the matter with him?' she asked.

'Want of some one to look after him, as his mother did,' replied the younger woman with a sob.

So on the morrow Miss Colani and old Dickie Carter set off on an errand of mercy in the direction of Laburnham Street, S.W.

'I hope that old raven won't be on hand,' said Miss

Colani, who had a saucepan concealed in her muff, while her companion carried a brown paper parcel, in which was a jam jar full of tripe and onions in a milky jelly.

‘Well, mind you’re civil to her if she is,’ grunted Dickie.

Fortunately it was not the ‘old raven’ who answered the door, but a slatternly, unhappy-looking little girl, who wasn’t sure that Mr. Simpson lived there, but there was a gentleman in bed upstairs, and they’d better go ‘up and see if it was ‘im.’

So they went up, and when Mr. Carter opened the door gently to reconnoitre, they both heard a strange moaning sound.

‘My gracious! Charlie, my dear! whatever’s the matter with you?’ cried Miss Colani, in a flutter, for his eyes were so large and bright, and his cheeks looked so hollow, while his face had evidently not been washed for hours.

‘Come and save me, Jinny,’ he murmured faintly, ‘save me from that awful woman! I shall die if you don’t.’

Dickie was standing with his back to the pair, so he could wink with impunity over the subjugation of Charlie Simpson; and he was as sure of the coming wedding as if he had heard the commencement of the marriage service, instead of the entreaty of the sick man.

‘My dear old boy, I’m going to wrap you up in a blanket and take you in a four-wheeler to my old dear,’ said Jane Elizabeth, wiping her eyes after hearing from her patient how grossly the landlady had neglected him, and how she had compelled him to get out of bed and hunt up the money for his weekly bill only an hour before.

'You'll try and bear it, won't you? It's only ten minutes' drive,' said Jinny.

'I'll bear anything that gets me out of this,' he replied.

So in a little while the feeble man, somewhat warmed and cheered by the warm life and love of the woman who loved him, crawled carefully downstairs, Jane Elizabeth leading the way, in case Mrs. Best should come suddenly upon them and endeavour to re-capture her lodger by force of arms.

'I think we'd better do without the blanket,' said the more cautious Dickie; 'she might send the police after us.'

So Charlie's possessions were brought down in armfuls, and piled round about him in the cab, his big fur-lined coat doing better than Mrs. Best's elderly blankets.

'She's not a-comin' yet!' cried the cabby, who, having had the state of affairs explained to him in as moderate language as Miss Colani could find, was getting quite excited, and testified his increasing sympathy by keeping a sharp look-out on the north and south corners of the street.

'Ere's more animiles a-comin' out of the Ark,' he would say as one or other appeared with fresh instalments of wearing apparel and other commodities in their arms. 'Bring 'em along! Wot a day we're 'avin'!'

'No! we're not a-goin' yet,' he remarked to his steed, who pawed the ground with an impatient hoof. 'The old catamaran's a-wettin' 'er whistle round the corner, that's wer she is, an' she ain't 'urryin' neither. I knows 'er,' and he shook his head a time or two, rose up in his seat and readjusted the rug, and then sat down again, whip in hand, to make a start when necessary without loss of time.

'Now we're ready to go,' said Miss Colani, pushing in a hat-box; 'I'm almost sorry the old cat's not handy, I'd like to have a word with her before going.'

'You're sure you've got everythink?' said Jehu, as he bent down sideways to see that the door was shut, "'cos it'll be no use a-comin' back for it if you haven't. She'll say there never wos nothink o' thet kind to 'er suttin' knowledge, an' send you in the bill for it. I knows 'em.'

Then he jerked the reins a time or two, and with a last remark on the general floweriness of flowery old skinners and their flowery dodges, drove off at a steady and gentle pace that was full of fine consideration for the invalid and his weak state.

Meanwhile, in obedience to an animated conversation with Miss Colani before she started, the blind woman and the young landlady, Mrs. Clark, had been hard at work on the largest and best bedroom in the house, which had been to let for some few weeks.

First they lighted a grand fire, and then they wiped floor and carpet over with a wet flannel. Next Mrs. Clark put up some new and glorious white curtains, and tied them coquettishly back with pink satin ribbon. After the bedding had been fairly roasted, the bed was made up with much humble splendour of a new white coverlid. There was also swift carrying to and fro of sundry ornaments for the mantelshelf, such as a bloated china rabbit lacking one paw and with the other supporting an ostentatious gilt laundry basket for matches, also a pair of anaemic shepherds, the one of the gentler sex being clothed in a manner highly improper for the outdoor life of a sheepfold, and lastly a rather remarkable clock which stated in flaunting gilt letters that it was a present from somewhere, and which by reason of its infirmity had to stand in a crumpled

china stand to prevent its tilting backward. Also the picture over the mantelpiece of Cain slaying Abel with an Indian tomahawk, was packed off in sudden and hopeless disgrace as not being fit for the eyes of a sick gentleman, and Samuel saying his prayers was put in the place of honour.

At last everything was ready, and the two women stood resting their hands on their tired hips, the one looking with genuine pride on the comfortable room that smelt so invitingly of warm clean sheets, and a fire with a log on it, and the other in the dark of her blindness trying not to be afraid of the new tie that all this meant.

'He's sure to marry her now,' she said to herself, while Mrs. Clark with the freedom of her kind, tossed her head, and, forgetting that her old comrade could not see, remarked, 'Looks fairly bridal, don't it?'

'So I should imagine,' said the foster-mother.

The sound of approaching wheels here caused them both to run, the one to Miss Colani's sitting-room, and the other to the front door.

Very soon the half-dazed invalid was sitting comfortably propped up with pillows in the largest easy-chair, and Jinny was at his feet pulling off his boots, while the blind woman caused sundry savoury odours to escape from furtively opened lids of saucepans on the little stove.

'How home-like it feels,' remarked the sick man, and the woman at his feet looked up at him with so illuminated a face that he put out his thin feverish hand and tenderly stroked her hair.

Dickie Carter had taken himself off, promising to come to dinner at three; so Jinny and the blind woman had the invalid all to themselves.

After he had sat long enough to cast off the shaking

of the ride, they put him to bed ; and what with the luxury of being cared for and the clean and comfortable air of his new quarters, also the sense of protection in the motherly strength and kindness of two good women, with recent memories of Mrs. Best in his mind, he uttered a fervent ‘Thank God,’ and fell asleep.

‘Will you look after him while I’m gone?’ said Jane Elizabeth ; ‘I shall be out about an hour or so. Let him sleep on, my old dear, won’t you?’

‘I want you to come with me and help me give that old scorpion a bit of my mind,’ said Miss Colani to the two Mackays. ‘I’ve got to go and tell her Charlie has left her for good and all, and get some things of his she’s kept from him. I mean to get even with her for the insulting things she’s said to him since he’s been ill.’

‘We’ll come by all means !’ they both exclaimed in the same breath.

Now when Mrs. Best had returned with her string bag hanging from her wrist, she found a strange silence in the house.

First she called down the stairs for ‘Mariar,’ and then she looked into the front parlour to see if the ‘front-parlour,’ as she called him, had come down.

The room looked unusually tidy, and his pipes and letters were nowhere to be seen. His hat and stick had gone, also the overcoat that lay as a rule on the little awkward sofa with the unresponsive and unpleasant springs.

‘I wonder if any one’s got in an’ took ‘em?’ she muttered to herself. Then she footed it ponderously up the creaking stairs, and gave a kind of double postman’s knock at his door, well calculated to hasten delirium in a feverish patient.

Not receiving any answer, she went in, and was so staggered at what she saw that she fell up against the wall and simply opened and shut her mouth a few times.

'If he ain't 'ooked it!' she cried at last, for the drawers were open and empty, the bedclothes in a heap on the bed, and nothing belonging to her late lodger save an empty pill-box and a horribly sour-smelling mess in a basin, which represented the generous diet to which Charlie Simpson had so nearly succumbed.

Again she called 'Mariar,' and again there was no response; and after looking into the room at the back, whose occupant was out all day, she came rather more quickly downstairs than was her wont, and feeling somewhat agitated, went to the string bag, and drawing therefrom a bottle labelled 'Methylated Spirit,' poured out some of its contents, and drank without any admixture of other fluid.

'They don't make the unsweetened as strong as they used,' she remarked to herself, as she sat down to turn things over in her mind.

'He've paid reg'lar,' she mused; 'I've taken care of that,' and she smiled a dreary withered smile at the thought of her cares in this respect. 'There ain't been no girls after 'im,' and this last reflection caused her to call once again for 'Mariar,' and take another refreshing draught from the bottle.

Scarcely had she done so when the bell rang so violently, and with such a soul-stirring peal, that Mrs. Best deemed it necessary to go and peer round the lace curtains in the front parlour to see who the ringer might be.

Having caught sight of a very large black hat overladen with black plumes and a pink bonnet with sundry spiky accoutrements beside it, she did not wait any

longer; but went swiftly to the door with the intention of giving the ladies a direct negative.

'It's no use females applyin' here,' she said to herself; 'there's no profit out of 'em.'

It was not without some trepidation, however, that she opened the door, for a long and aggressive double knock smote sharply on her ear as she fumbled about for the latch.

'Does Mrs. Best live here?' asked a man's voice, and Stuart Mackay loomed so large on the landlady's horizon that she forgot to veto the 'females' that were with him.

'Have you come after the rooms?' said Mrs. Best, narrowing the width of the doorway.

'How many have you to let?' queried Mr. Mackay in a deep stage tone.

'I don't take in females,' remarked Mrs. Best.

'No! I guess you don't. It's easier to take in single men, isn't it?' retorted Mr. Mackay.

'Is it for yourself you've come?' demanded the keeper of the door.

'No! It's for a friend, a single man,' replied Mr. Mackay genially.

'Then you'd better step inside,' said the lone woman.

Once fairly inside, and on the firm ground of the front parlour floor, Miss Colani, who was nearly bursting with enforced silence, took up her parable in set terms.

'We've come for Mr. Simpson's sleeve-links and other things of his you have, and also for a sovereign change out of the week's bill he paid you this morning.'

'What d'you mean?' cried Mrs. Best, swiftly recognising that war had been declared, and girding herself for the fray. 'I don't have no dealings with any one but Mr. Simpson, and he's gone. Who are you?'

'We are his trustees and executors, at least this

lady is, and the rest of us are legally appointed witnesses under a common court of justice, see Lodging-house Keepers Acts, number unstated, of the reign of Queen Victoria,' said Stuart Mackay, slowly reading as if from the back of a long blue envelope which he had drawn from his pocket.

'Is it a summons?' gasped Mrs. Best feebly, to the secret rapture of Miss Colani, whose thirst for vengeance was in no way abated at the thought that she was in 'Charlie's room,' where he had been starved on wretchedly cooked food, pinched by inadequate heating, and charged extortionately for the privilege.

'It will be if you don't hand over Mr. Simpson's things and change by two o'clock to-day,' said Mr. Mackay significantly. 'It's a quarter to two now.'

'I'll get 'em at once,' she said, 'the things, I mean. But I don't owe him no change.'

'Oh, you don't, don't you?' cried Jane Elizabeth, suddenly starting up and waving the bill in the other's face. 'What about this? Meat, 3s. 6d.—during these last two days, when he's not had or ordered any for a week! Or this? Coals, 2s. 6d.—and he's had one miserable fire in his bedroom, and that had to be put out because it smoked so. Tea, sugar, candles (and he has gas in both his rooms), wood, and black-beetle paste, 5s. ; and, worse than all, extra attendance, 2s.—making thirteen shillings' worth of the most brazen-faced robbery that ever was!'

If Miss Colani paused, it was only for want of breath; but Mr. Mackay pulled out his watch, and gravely shaking his head, said—

'Time's going. It'll be no use after two. That was the hour fixed upon up to which this person was to be allowed to hand back such articles of Mr. Charles Simpson's property as she has from time to

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time become illegally possessed of. Also the sum of one sovereign overcharged in bill of this date.'

Without another word Mrs. Best left the room, and the three conspirators gazed at each other with exultant mirth, and grinned in silence.

The landlady was not long gone, and when she reappeared it was with a small tin box in which were sundry trinkets, such as sleeve links, an old-fashioned malachite brooch, a silver card-case, and a shirt pin.

'I've took care of 'em,' she groaned, as Jane Elizabeth slipped them into her pocket. 'Mariar had a way of picking up things and puttin' them away in my drawers.'

'It's catching, I know,' said Mr. Mackay civilly, as he took possession of a parcel containing a few ties, some socks, a pair of patent-leather shoes, handkerchiefs, and a dress shirt.

'I can't give you the pound; I haven't such a thing in the house; I went and paid my rent with it this morning,' wailed Mrs. Best.

'Ah, then, there's nothing for it but to refuse to take these things and go at once for the summons,' said Stuart, turning to his companions, who nodded their heads decisively, while Miss Colani drew the little tin box from her pocket saying, 'in that case I won't take this, and we can charge her with being in possession of stolen goods.'

'I'll have one more look to make sure,' cried the trembling woman, and of course the coin was there, with its brethren, in the lean little purse.

'Ah, I thought you'd think better of it,' said Mr. Mackay, handing the coin with much pretended legal stiffness to Miss Colani.

'You've had a narrow escape,' said Mr. Mackay, as Mrs. Best stood holding the door for them to go out.

'I don't know as I have,' she rejoined sulkily. Whereupon the floodgates of Jane Elizabeth Brown's pent-up wrath were let loose upon her, and Mr. and Mrs. Mackay realised for a few moments that there was some truth in her lover's remark that her language was strong at times.

'You weasel-faced old Judy!' she said, suddenly shaking her fist at the landlady. 'Just to please your own measly, mean temper, you'd have let him die if we hadn't come and taken him away by force this morning. You've robbed him and bled him till there's hardly a drop of warm blood in him to keep him alive; and you've let him lie there and call for a drink and shiver with cold, and what did you care as long as you could skin him bare of his hard-earned money? Oh, you old beast, you! I could kill you, that's what I could do!'

By this time Cora and Stuart had gently edged the angry defender of 'Charlie' on to the doorstep, and Mrs. Best, who was herself no mean adept in the noble art of slanging, nor at a loss for effective verbal missiles when put to it, feeling once more safe now that they were outside, closed the door just so as to open it enough to admit of her face alone being visible, as she hurled a boomerang at her fiery foe, in these terms, intermixed with others unwritable—

'So *you've* clawed 'old of 'im, 'ave you, you ugly cat! Well, I wishes 'im joy, and you too. But it'll be the last time I'll take a theatrical into my 'ouse. They're a dirty lot. I see as you was one of 'em the moment as I set eyes on you.'

So saying she slammed the door as an indication that the conversation was closed. She had, however, reckoned without the letterbox, and Miss Colani's fertility of resource; for while she was pausing to take

a thin blue envelope out of the former, a hot breath blew on to her bent fingers, and an undaunted voice rang shrill through the narrow slit: 'Shut up, you sooty, old, broken-winded old besom! Go and sell yourself for rags and bones! 'Twould make broth for the next sick lodger if there was enough of it.' And with sundry choice allusions to the need for insect powder and *eau de cologne*, also the absence of beauty from Mrs. Best's person, Jane E. gave one final blast—'Best, indeed! Worst is more like, you shrivelled old grave-digger!'

'You might say that the best of women are worsted sometimes,' said Stuart as they hastened away. 'But, I say, you aren't going to slang poor Charlie Simpson like that, I hope, are you?'

'Not likely!' cried Miss Colani, 'never! You ask my old dear if I ever slang her. She'll tell you. It's only when I come on a right cruel old hag like that, or a beast like Dukelle, I use such words. To think of him being at her mercy, and such a mother as he had! But I say, didn't he do it splendidly,' she cried, turning to Mrs. Mackay, and as they parted at the corner of Strephon Street, she added, with tears in her eyes, 'we shall always be grateful to you both for helping me out with that old catamaran.'

When Jane E. sped upstairs with the spoils of war, it was to find Mr. Charles sitting up in bed and drinking hot tea with very evident enjoyment of the same.

'Jinny,' he said, 'I've been thinking, dear, we must get married this very afternoon. I feel quite well enough to drive to the Registry Office. Hadn't we better?'

'We'll be married in a church afterwards, won't we?' asked his hostess, blushing a most becoming and

youthful blush, 'I'd rather wait, dear, than not be married in a church. I'm not religious, but a marriage don't seem like a marriage, unless you are married by a parson.'

Besides, who could wear a white veil and orange blossoms at a Registry Office? and, on these she had set her heart through all the long patient years she had been waiting for Charlie. So it was settled that if the patient were well enough they would go to Bow Street and be married that very afternoon, and afterwards celebrate the wedding in the full splendour of the parish church.

But when Dickie Carter heard of the plan as they sat eating the festive dinner, he shook his head.

'It won't do,' he said, 'he's very ill, you know. You mustn't let him get up for a day or two. It may turn out to be fever, but if it doesn't he won't be strong enough for any excitement for a week yet.'

So with a little sigh of relief, for in truth Jane E. had reasons of her own for not wanting to become Mrs. Simpson that day or the next, she went up to the invalid with some dainty custard, and found he had eaten all his soup, and was ready for the next course.

'Dickie Carter says you mustn't think of getting up or going out, dear,' she said tenderly, 'so we'll just go on as we are till we can go to church.'

'All right,' he said, 'only I want you to feel quite sure about me. You've saved my life, my dear old girl, and I wish my mother were here to thank you.'

That night *Mephistopheles* went better than ever before, and one of the more critical of the élite in the stalls remarked that Beatrice was the performance of a genuine artist, and that there was more in the play than he had deemed possible from previous performances.

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As Jane E. was returning from the Camelot, she stopped for a moment to look at the lights on the Embankment, and listen to Big Ben chiming a quarter to one.

‘How beautiful it looks to-night,’ she said, ‘and how dreary it looked last night. What a difference one man can make in a woman’s life !’

The next day Charlie was so much better that Stuart Mackay was requisitioned to play bezique with him, while Miss Colani went out for an hour or two.

‘My old dear and Stuart ’ll look after you,’ she said, looking in at the cheerful bedroom into which the sun was pouring.

‘Are you going to pay Mrs. Best another visit ?’ laughed Mr. Mackay.

‘No indeed ! I’m going to pay two calls,’ was her answer.

The first call was at a large and fashionable drapery establishment, where some unspeakably precious moments were spent in the consideration of the beauties of ivory, cream, and snow-white satin ; also sprays of orange blossoms and tulle.

The next was a journey by tram and rail to the vast cemetery at Forest Gate. It would be hard to find a drearier spot than the cheap part of the great burying-ground, especially on a winter’s day, when the almost innumerable mounds take on a desolation that is grim, to say the least of it.

On this afternoon, however, there was a flood of pale and chilly sunshine on the dismal scene ; and the patches of sombre people dotted about here and there looked a little less mournful for the yellow haze that lightened the garments of grief worn by most of them.

Away in the barrenest spot of all, where the grass was too often interfered with to be anything but

scrubby and uncertain, and where neither tree nor shrub relieved the monotony, a young lady in a large black hat might have been seen evidently hunting about for some particular mound.

Long and patiently she searched, till coming upon a shabby little wooden cross, with a number on it, she halted, saying to herself, 'Yes, that's it. That's Flossie's grave.'

Next, pulling off her gloves, she took a piece of pumice stone out of her bag, and began rubbing away at the dirty paint till it was all cleaned off. Then she opened a tin of enamel, and painted the cross afresh, and dazzling white.

'My! how pretty it looks!' she said, as she stood up to get a better view of the effect. Just then the air round her shook with the slow thunder of the Woolwich guns.

Then she opened another pot, and began painting large letters on the horizontal arm of the cross.

While she was doing this the sound of singing came floating on the chilly wind that played about her, and she stopped to listen.

It was a band of mourners coming from a grave, and singing, 'Nearer Home.' It sounded very sweet and plaintive, and stirred Miss Colani into a wholly unexpected burst of tears; and she had to lay down her brush and get out her pocket handkerchief, and succumb to that uncontrollable fit of crying that had come to her with the wind-blown strains of the hymn.

Lardy Dukelle's treachery, her own boundless folly in trusting him, the brief exquisite glimpse of motherhood when, to her lawless hunger for a babe of her own, had come that tiny warm thing that lay on her strong young arm, and breathed with such musical fluttering close to her bosom all night; the valley of the shadow

of death into which the tiny creature wandered when but three months old never to come back again, the wild agony of her grief, the going back to the old life at the Camelot,—all these memories came crowding round her with such clearness of outline that she did not know how long she had been weeping, till roused by a voice near her saying, ‘Let me comfort you, sister.’

She looked up quickly and saw the poke bonnet of a Hallelujah lass bending over her.

‘We lay the bodies of our beloved dead in the clay, but Jesus takes their souls along with Him. Cast all your care upon Him, He cares for you, He will comfort you. Bless His holy name,’ and before Miss Colani could recover from her surprise, the speaker had turned away.

So she fell to painting the word ‘Flossie’ with renewed energy and tenderness, and soon it stood out in brilliant blue against the white, and Miss Colani murmured words of benediction over her work, and all that the little cross represented, ‘You won’t ever be forgotten, my little darling, but I’m not going to speak about you. You taught me more than I could have learnt any other way, and I know you’re safe where you are. I’m going to be married in a church, and I mean to make Charlie Simpson as good a wife as I know how. Good-bye.’

That night, as Beatrice stood in the wings talking to Cora Mackay, she said, ‘I’m going to leave out that nasty little gag about the Salvationists being pokerites and tambourine smackers. It’s low.’ And she did.

## CHAPTER XIII

### MR. BLODGER ON AMUSEMENTS AND MARRIAGE

DURING all the weeks that had elapsed since the burning of Sellcuts', neither Mr. Blake nor the Corporation had been idle concerning the future of Sellcuts' estate.

How the old place had come by its name, no one seemed to know; but whatever the origin of the name, it was certain that the ground had belonged to the lord of Brombridge Manor for centuries, and that Lord Clanbinder could not, therefore, sell it as he would like to have done.

Mr. Blake had offered to buy the whole estate for the modest sum of one hundred thousand pounds; and his lordship had gnashed his teeth, in the privacy of his daily ride over Kingsboro' Moor, at the thought of what such a sum, cash down, would mean for him under present circumstances, and the stupidity of things legal that prevented him from closing with the tempting offer. He had, however, promised to accept a ground rent of six thousand a year, and so the land difficulty was overcome.

Then arose the question of compensation to the leaseholders of the five public-houses and the tannery. At first it seemed almost impossible to get Messrs.

Virtue, Liberty, and Virtue to come to terms. But help came to Mr. Blake's side of the matter in a most unexpected manner, for the Narrow Way Pilgrims, the Teetotal Warriors, Ebenezer, and the Primitive Methodists, agreed to sink minor differences, and unite to hold a great Temperance Demonstration in the somewhat beer-loving town. It is, however, safe to affirm that no thought of aiding the manager of Sellcuts' had entered the head of Pilgrim Blodger, as he approached the Baptist minister on the subject of doing something to awaken the citizens to a sense of sobriety, though in his well-meaning, if somewhat narrow soul, he felt a growing respect for the man who had so gallantly saved his wife, and had suffered so much in pocket from a cruel plot, and the reduction of a just 'Insurance,' by the near presence of the 'Green Grapes,' the 'Goat and Fold,' the 'Piebald Horse,' the 'Blind Tinker,' and the 'Diadem.'

Consequently, when Mr. Paine pointed out to him in the course of a long and earnest conversation, that it would be very much safer for Sellcuts' estate to be leased entirely to Mr. Blake, instead of, as now, to other and less estimable people, including the Corporation, who had tolerated the disreputable houses in the Cut, he did not oppose the idea with the militant fierceness he would have brought to bear on it a month ago, nor quote texts of Scripture to refute the proposition.

'Blake's got a splendid scheme in his head,' said Mr. Paine; 'and if he can only carry it out, it'll do for Brombridge what hundreds of sermons haven't done. I am not at liberty to tell you more than this: that, besides a model place of amusement, it includes public swimming-baths and a gymnasium.'

'Does it include pointing out the way of salvation

to lost souls?' said Mr. Blodger in the tone of a man who has discovered a helplessly weak point.

'Does the bank do that, or your shop, Mr. Blodger? If they did, you know where your business would be in a very short time. What would be the use of parsons, missionaries, pulpits, and places of worship? Everything for its purpose. But I frankly own that I should want to kick the booking-clerk at the station if he were asking questions about my soul while I was getting a ticket, and in a hurry to catch the train.'

Pilgrim Blodger shook his head deprecatingly. Mr. Paine's words might be quite true, but they didn't sound proper. He had been so little accustomed to converse with people who dared to be true, rather than proper, and to say what they thought and felt instead of what some one else considered they ought to have thought and felt, that it seemed dangerously like profanity to him when common-sense was brought to bear on spiritual matters.

It always shocked him more or less to encounter this uncompromising directness in Mr. Paine, for to say the thing you were expected to say was, from his point of view, more religious than to say the thing that was true.

Alas! it was a habit of evasion engendered by a certain strain of piety in which he had been brought up. As, for instance, on one occasion, when he was a small boy of eleven, and he refused to say the lines of a hymn—

'My soul is mourning for her sins,  
Where pleasure ends, there grace begins,' etc.

because, as he said, he did not feel them, his father, who was a good man and a zealous local preacher, thrashed him until he did.

'If you don't feel them now,' roared the parent, 'you shall do so before I've done with you.'

Of course the boy did as his father required, only it was at the cost of truth and spontaneity of religious expression, and of growth in honest thinking.

One of Mr. Paine's good gifts was, that his own sincerity of utterance made it easier and happier for those who were with him to be genuine rather than artificial, so that even insincere people became frank in talking to him, almost against their will.

It was so with Mr. Blodger, who was not so much consciously insincere as unconsciously conventional; and letting himself go, he became interested in those visionary baths, and began to rehearse some of the unsanitary and barbarous conditions existing within a stone's-throw of Ebenezer, the Bank, and the Police Station.

'Of course, if it weren't for drink, things wouldn't be so bad,' he said; 'but what are you to do when the Mayor himself sets such a bad example?'

'Either mend him or end him,' returned the other briskly. 'You've only yourselves to thank for him. You wouldn't take the trouble to turn out some of the convivial Town Councillors to put in such men as Harris, the vicar's churchwarden, or Mr. Fletcher, or even Mr. Bleby. So you have as Chief Magistrate a man who is often only slightly sober. But I must say this for him, he is very kind-hearted, and does most generous things now and then; and I'm not sure that, for all his drinking, he's as bad, even as a mayor, as a man like Bleby would be, who has not a generous impulse anywhere about him, and who, though a strict teetotaller, has a venomous tongue, and is hopelessly narrow.'

'Brother Bleby says he'll work against Mr. Blake for all he's worth to prevent him putting up another music hall in place of the old one.'

'Of course he will!' cried the minister; 'but he

shan't succeed if I can help it. We'd better join hands with a good man like Blake, who is sure to run a decent place of entertainment, than squeeze him out, and let in a lot of low-down folk who will keep Brombridge drunken, poor, and vicious, as it has been in the past.'

'But what about the play-acting and dancing?' asked Pilgrim Blodger solemnly.

'Neither is in my line,' replied the other; 'but all those hundreds of young people out of the cloth factory, for example, had much better be looking at play-acting when their day's work is done than loafing about the streets, with the public-house always under their noses, or the temptation of the lonely country lanes.'

'Why they can't stay in their homes, as I had to do when I was young, I can't see,' said Mr. Blodger. 'But if they must go out, there is the Y.M.C.A.'

'To begin with, the homes of many of them are not places to be recommended for supplying rest and recreation after a hard day's work in a close factory, and the Y.M.C.A. is not designed as a place of amusement, nor is its scope wide enough to cater for all legitimate tastes. Also, there are objections to making it a meeting-place for the sexes.'

'Then let 'em keep apart!' retorted Mr. Blodger. 'There's a deal of harm comes of young men and women being together.'

'But much more good, or how are they to fall in love, and get married, if they don't meet?'

'I've nothing to do with their getting married,' he replied rather stiffly. 'I'm looking forward to a place where there's neither marrying nor giving in marriage.'

By which the minister knew that the pilgrim brother had a matrimonial corn somewhere, and he turned the talk back again to the subject of amusement.

'What do people want amusing for?' queried his guest. 'In a weary world of perishing souls on their way to destruction, it ill becomes us to be laughing and masquerading, when we may be cut off any moment in our sins.'

'Ah! but that's a very dyspeptic view to take of this wonderful thing we call life. Anyhow, I want butter to my bread, and jam too. I suppose you prefer yours dry.'

'I had to have dry bread when I was a child, and had done wrong.'

'Yes. And now you've become a man, you've put away childish things. But come, I think we'd better talk over some of the arrangements for the Temperance Demonstration.'

When preliminaries had been settled, it was decided that Ebenezer, being the biggest place in Brombridge, and much better lighted than the Town Hall, should be the scene of action.

'They've arrested one of the Dukelles,' remarked Mr. Blodger casually, as he went out; 'it's on all the newspaper boards.'

Accordingly, when Mr. Paine opened the door to let out his visitor, the discordant voices of newsboys fell on his ear; and resting against the tobacconist's window opposite, was a large placard announcing, 'Smart capture at Monte Carlo.'

'So they've caught one of the rascals just in time for the assizes,' said the vicar, who came up at that moment, and who was on the kindest terms with his brethren of the Nonconformist cloth.

The purchase of an afternoon paper soon put all three in possession of details, from which it appeared that, relying on his clever disguises, and running short of funds, Lardy Dukelle had gone to Monte Carlo to

try his former undeviating luck at the tables. He had been caught by a detective, who had been put on his track by an invalid gentleman who professed to be struck by his likeness to a 'wanted' criminal, and had disappeared after giving the information.

'He's safe in Brombridge Gaol by now,' said Mr. Paine; and thinking of that other prisoner, 'No. 72,' also there, he added, 'what a wonderful piece of poetic justice!'

'It's of no use to have the Demonstration while the assizes are on,' said Mr. Carmichael when they told him of the proposal; 'the people won't be able to think or care about anything else.'

So it was decided that after the assizes Brombridge should have an awakening, and the vicar promised to preside at the first meeting, though it was in a chapel.

'We ought to ask Colonel Uraine to take the chair on one evening,' said Mr. Paine as a feeler, for he wasn't sure of the latter's capacity.

'He ought to be invited, as he is a magistrate,' said the vicar; 'but he's not an abstainer.'

'Are you?' cried the other with some surprise.

'Yes, certainly,' replied the vicar quietly, 'you don't suppose I should consent to take the chair at your meeting if I were not.'

'I've known some clergymen, and even brewers do so,' was the reply. 'But I cannot help thinking how funny it would be to see Virtue, senior, in the chair, with Dean Gorsetown as the principal speaker, letting fly as is his wont on the iniquities of the traffic,' and they both laughed.

Mr. Bleby was standing at his shop door as Mr. Paine passed by, and not having spoken to his former minister since the night when he and Mrs. Cox had

walked out of the church meeting, he would have turned his head away, and pretended not to see him, but the other held out his hand, saying—

‘Well, brother, and how is the world going with you?’

‘Tolerably, only tolerably,’ he replied awkwardly; for he had spoken so badly of his former minister behind his back, that he did not feel particularly happy in facing him.

‘Have you heard the news?’ he added, rallying to conversation point.

‘You mean about Lardy Dukelle’s arrest?’

‘No. I’m alluding to the goings-on at the Hall—Miss Uraine’s pretty little doings.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Mr. Paine, with such genuine alarm in look and voice that the other knew he had not heard.

‘She’s run away from home, and been traced to London,’ said Mr. Bleby significantly.

‘Miss Uraine run away from home?’ cried his listener incredulously. ‘Are you sure? What for?’

‘What can you expect with theatre people living next door to her, and she always in there?’ said the old mischief-maker.

‘Speak out, man!’ cried the other, seizing him not very gently by the arm; ‘do you mean to say she has gone off—with—with any one?’

‘Don’t claw me like that,’ protested the hairdresser, ‘I didn’t say she’d gone off with any one.’

‘No! But you insinuated it,’ ejaculated the minister, letting go, and feeling a mighty longing to knock him down, and have done with him. However, to save himself, he thrust his hands into his pockets, and stood squarely before him.

‘Look here, Bleby,’ he said sternly, ‘don’t you try

any of your confounded scandal-mongering upon me! You've told me that Miss Uraine has run away from home, and been traced to London, and you've hinted that the people at the Knoll have something to do with it. Are you trying to make me believe that my friend Blake has to do with her going?

'I'm not trying to make you believe anything,' was the curt answer, as Mr. Bleby turned into his shop.

'The poison of asps is under their tongue,' muttered Mr. Paine, as he stood for a moment wondering what he had better do to stop any mischief of Mr. Bleby's dissemination, and learn what the facts of the case were.

At that moment he caught sight of Ted Uraine coming out of the Post Office, with his dog Magpie at his heels, and Mr. Bleby watched the pair from behind his counter as they shook hands, and walked away together.

'What's the matter?' asked the minister, taking the boy's arm, and noticing his pallor and his heavy troubled eyes.

'Only a bother at home'; and Ted looked down at his dog.

'You had better take me into your confidence, my boy,' said Mr. Paine, 'for I've heard about it upside down from Mr. Bleby, and it will probably be necessary for me to contradict his statements.'

'There isn't much to tell,' was the answer, 'mother and Mora had a row over the visits to the Blakes; and Mora went up to Aunt Margetson's in London, without telling us she was going. She caught cold on the journey, and the doctors are afraid she has rheumatic fever.'

'My dear fellow, I am sorry for you all! Do the Blakes know about it?'

'Oh yes!' and Ted brightened up a little, 'Mr.

Blake's been awfully kind. When father got the Margetsons' telegram, he took it into the Knoll, and Mr. Blake gave up a committee meeting at Kingsboro' Castle to go with father and me at once to Grosvenor Place. That's where the Margetsons live, you know. But Mora is in St. George's Hospital, they think she'll get better nursing there.'

'What does your mother feel about it?'

'Oh, she was very angry about it at first, said Ted ; 'she said it was all mine and father's fault, and that Mora would never be able to come back to Brombridge again after such a scandal.'

'Stuff and nonsense !' exclaimed the minister, 'why, that would be the very way to create a scandal. She must come back the very moment she is well enough. I'll call and tell your mother so if you don't object.'

'I wish you would,' groaned the boy. 'It's perfectly wretched at home just now. Father is stopping with my cousin, Harry Margetson, and Mr. Blake goes up last thing at night, and comes back at eleven each morning, and is too busy to see me. Maggie Blake isn't much company. She does nothing but sit and nurse the kitten Mora gave her, and cry, and ask when Mora is coming to see her.'

'My lad,' said Mr. Paine, 'you are wasting your life in a very serious manner. Are you not studying for some profession or other?'

'Not that I know of. Mr. Blake says I ought to go to college, and father agrees with him ; but mother won't let me go. She says I should learn a lot of evil, and gamble, and be fast, as her brothers were,' replied Ted, dolefully.

'I'll go and see your mother, my boy. Perhaps between us we can get her to alter her opinion.'

But when Mr. Paine sat talking it over with Mrs.

Paine that evening, he said some rather disrespectful things of the Colonel for being so completely under his wife's thumb as to sacrifice the children's interests to her twopenny-halfpenny views of life—as he called them—just for the sake of peace.

## CHAPTER XIV

### MRS. BLAKE, SENIOR, VISITS THE KNOLL

AT the home farm in Bickerton there had been a scene of the greatest excitement when to Joe and Peggy had been communicated the wonderful tidings that 'Maister Paul' had sent and commanded his mother's immediate presence at the Knoll, to help him take care of his wife until such time as her friend should be well enough to come back to Brombridge again.

'He has done without me all these years,' said old Mrs. Blake to Joe, 'and now he wants me to come at a moment's notice. It seems as if he were driving me up just as Peggy does her cows, when she's late getting them into the barn for milking.'

'Parents, obey your children,' said old Joe skittishly, 'vor 'tis the only way of getting the better o' they. You just pack up and go, and me and Peggy 'll keep things agoin' till you come home again.'

'He wants me to start off to-morrow,' replied the old lady thoughtfully. 'I wonder what's the matter. 'Tis a good big cheque he's sent. He says I'm to take Peggy or Joe with me.'

But, as it happened, neither Peggy nor Joe was invited by their sturdy old mistress to accompany her, for she was not quite sure within herself which of them

might provide her with the greater anxiety on the journey—Joe who would want to get out and refresh at every stopping-place, or Peggy who, not having been on a long journey in all the years of her life, would probably be in mortal terror the whole time, and cry and wish herself back in Bickerton.

Mr. Blake had given instructions for the purveyance of a generous hamper of real Devonshire products—cream, fowls, butter, and eggs—and with the putting up of these, and the packing of all her best clothing, Mrs. Blake had no time to get an interview with her friends the Chitterlings, to whom she guessed the news of her flight would be a source of immense curiosity and envy.

‘You shall drive me to the station, Joe,’ she said, ‘and then go on to the Priory and tell Miss Lily where I’ve gone.’

At 10.45 A.M. an oaken chest heavily corded, a bonnet box of mammoth size, two hampers, and a huge posy of pussy willows, were piled into the little cart; and Mrs. Blake, taking a last somewhat regretful look at the long thatch and the walnut trees, got into the pony-chaise, leaving Peggy with her blue check apron up to her eyes, and sundry smaller divinities in various stages of awe and envy at the departure of the ‘missis’ for ‘somewheres not var vrom Lunnun.’

‘He’s been a goodish time inviting me; but I’m rarely glad he’s done so at last,’ was the burden of the old lady’s thoughts, as the train bore her swiftly from Bickerton. ‘It’s a mercy for him I’m not one of the coney kind, or he’d have had to come and fetch me himself.’

At Swindon all the tickets had to be given up, and the collector had rather a bad time of it in getting Mrs. Blake’s.

'This isn't the first time I've travelled, young man,' she said sternly. 'And I've taken your number and description in my mind, and I'll report you directly I get to London.'

'Oh, they are a lot of thieves! The idea of coming and taking it in broad daylight too! I wish that guard had come up. I'd have got my ticket back. However, they won't catch me buying another, I can tell them.'

Accordingly when at Paddington Paul, who had not seen his mother for five years, caught her in his arms as she was stepping off the carriage, it was characteristic of her that instead of kissing him at once, she exclaimed, 'Paul, they've taken my ticket from me at Swindon! What shall I do? I know just what the man is like, he took it clean out of my hand when I went to show it him.'

'It's all right, mother,' replied her son, realising that his mother had not altered in the interval of years. 'It was his duty to take it away.'

'I would like to have shown you something of London, mother; but I am so pressed for time, that unless you feel too tired to travel any further, I want to go on to Brombridge at once.'

'The idea of your thinking I should be tired, Paul! Why, I have been sitting still doing nothing all this while.'

But she did not relish the drive from Paddington to Victoria at all, and Paul was certain that his mother was scared at the roar and the crowd of the traffic, though she would have died sooner than confess to such a weakness.

'It's very dirty,' she remarked, 'and not half as pretty as Bickerton.'

Once in the train for Brombridge, the old lady recovered her almost childlike curiosity as to the kind

of place her son was taking her to ; and he had to break it gently to her that his house was not a farmhouse, and it was rather a big one. Also he took the opportunity of telling her a few of the circumstances that necessitated his calling her to his aid in such a summary manner.

' You will understand that my wife is in a very feeble state mentally,' he said, ' and extremely depressed owing to the absence of her friend. Miss Uraine is the only person besides myself that she has ever loved. She is very fond of her white kitten, and it has been something of both an education and a comfort to her.'

' Uraine is a family name near us, are they related ? '

' I believe they are cousins. But they don't visit.'

' Is that your carriage, my son ? ' cried the old lady as she stood on the station steps, with her hand on his arm, while a handsome brougham with its smart Russian horses, and servants in dark green liveries, wheeled round to take them up.

Once again she made an exclamation, and that was as they drove up the rather imposing carriage-way to the house.

' My dear ! ' she cried,—' why, it's far grander than the Chitterlings' ! '

' I'm glad you think so. You will be able to comfort yourself with the thought of it when old Chitterling tries it on with you.'

When they entered the drawing-room Maggie came forward to greet them with the old half-frightened, bewildered look on her face ; and her husband's unusual perturbation did not tend to make matters easier for her.

Paul was certainly unnerved. This was the first meeting of his shrewd, capable, and unsentimental mother with his tenderly petted and half-witted wife.

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If the former should let any disappointment find its way into voice or manner, Maggie would be sure to know it ; and no after-kindness would remove the impression, or get her to take to her mother-in-law. The old lady had lived so long undisputed monarch of all she surveyed at Bickerton that she rarely withheld any opinion of people or things, even at the risk of giving offence. And now it was not a question of giving offence only, it was one of winning, or not winning, a place of the utmost moment to all her son's future plans in the affection of his wife.

Paul had counted on his mother's predominating qualities of sagacity and loyalty to all that belonged to herself, and he had not counted in vain ; for when, with a deeper note in his voice than usual, he took his wife's hand in his own cold and slightly trembling one, and said—

‘Mother, this is my dear wife Maggie,’ his mother cried out heartily—

‘And a real pretty lassie it is ! My dear, won’t you give me a kiss ?’

So it was all right ! And Maggie, with that strange unexpected flicker of intelligence that was such a pitiful remnant of what might have been, stooped and kissed her mother-in-law, and said to Paul—

‘Why didn’t you let her come before ?’—which so tickled the older lady that she laughed,—a genuine kindly Devonshire laugh that acted like a charm in straightening out matters.

‘He wanted to keep you all to himself, my dear,’ she replied.

With a mountain lifted off his mind, Mr. Blake poured out some tea for the traveller, while Maggie took her cloak and gloves up to the charming bedroom prepared for the guest.

A very nice but inexperienced maid had taken the place of Elsie More, so the cook had secretly superintended the arrangements for the reception of the 'master's mother'; and Maggie had placed bunches of freysias and Neapolitan violets on various tables and coigns of vantage.

She had also, under the cook's direction, strewed lavender in all the empty drawers of wardrobe and bureau; and what with the cheery fire, the sweet perfumes, the exquisite upholstery, and the honest faces of the household staff as first one and then another came to perform some little service for her, old Mrs. Blake realised that she was in clover, and was quite won over by the time she got down to the drawing-room, and was disposed to reiterate her daughter-in-law's question—

'Why didn't she come sooner?'

Dinner passed off very well, except that Paul knew his mother was missing her cider, but that nothing would induce her to say so.

After coffee he had to go out, but the two must take care of each other he said, and he would be back as soon as possible.

'Well, I'm glad that's over!' he remarked to himself as he drove off. 'Mother will take to her right enough. But I hope Miss Mora won't be ill for long. *She* loves Maggie for her own sake, my mother will only love her for mine. Still, that is a great concession, though one cannot tell how long it will last. At any rate, she must have realised by now that my Maggie, with all her weakness, is one to be far prouder of than Miss Lily Chitterling. Ugh! the very thought of that bony, moustached creature makes me squirm. How ever mother could have looked a second time at her! And yet how anxious she was that I should make up

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to her at that picnic, and how she manœuvred for us to meet'; and he smiled to think that he had preferred years of loneliness, and contentment therewith, to the company of that angular and always elderly girl, Miss Chitterling, whose good father had strained much gold out of a herbal draught.

There was no smile on Paul Blake's face, however, when he entered the Crown Hotel, overlooking Brombridge Station; for there was grave business on hand, and not only his solicitor, and the barrister who was to defend Elsie More to meet, but also the solicitor for the Crown in the prosecution of the Dukelles and their accomplices.

'The unhappy young man has made a clean breast of it,' said the latter. 'He intends pleading guilty on all three counts,—the wilful burning of the music hall; the tampering with the hydrant; and the plot to take Mrs. Blake out of the custody of her husband. He has also put us on the track of the woman L'Estrange, who was last with him in Jersey for an hour or two.'

'I wish you could get hold of the one who is archfiend in all this,' said Mr. Blake in his hardest voice. 'It's the father, James Dukelle, who originated and planned the diabolical thing. I should like to see him hanged, but I'm afraid he'll keep out of the way. He is the very incarnation of devilish cunning and cruelty.'

'Oh, he'll get his due,' said the Crown solicitor coolly; 'he may escape justice for a time, he can't hide himself for ever.'

'What defence is being made for Elsie More?' asked the editor of the *Brombridge Times*, who, in the capacity of old friend of Edward Macker, Q.C., was making one of the party in the private dining-room of the hotel.

'Her relations with the other prisoner, and that she

was coerced by him. We shall appeal for mercy on the score of her condition,' was the answer.

'Who is paying the piper?' asked the editor again.

'I am,' said Mr Blake. 'But that fact is not to be published. It might lead to a grievous misconception, as she has been in my service. The fact is, she was engaged to my groom, and the poor fellow is nearly beside himself with grief. I don't think he believes she's guilty.'

'You're an odd fish,' thought the editor, as he looked with new interest at Sellcuts' manager,—'there are not many who would plank down fifty guineas to defend a wretched girl who had helped to do a man such a bad turn.'

Aloud he remarked that the trial would probably furnish some sensational copy before it was over, and inquired if Mrs. Blake was going to be one of the witnesses.

'We hope not,' replied Mr. Macker, 'but if the judge insists on it, we trust his lordship will allow her examination to take place *in camera*.'

It was long past midnight when Mr. Blake returned home, but he found his stalwart old mother gallantly nodding in her chair in the library.

'What a grand old game-bird you are!' he remarked, as he stood before her with his back to the fire; 'there is not another woman in the world that would have packed up at a moment's notice, taken a long journey, and sat up till after midnight as you have done; and I declare you look as fresh and giddy as when I last said good-bye to you, five years ago,' and he laughed with a boyish exultant laugh that was good to hear.

'She's a lovely creature,' said his mother. 'Why did you not let me see her sooner?'

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'She wasn't ready,' he replied. 'She had to get accustomed to things. Her friend, Miss Uraine, has been very useful to her. She has never, till now, had a friend of her own age that was a desirable one to have.'

'Are you teetotalers here, Paul?' asked his mother. 'I miss my glass of cider.'

'We don't have anything of that kind, mother,' replied her son, his face clouding a little. 'Maggie is not allowed to touch wine or things of that sort, and it would be so cruel to tease her with the sight of what she may not have. But I haven't forgotten you. Here is the key of this little cupboard,' and he pointed to a carved cabinet in a corner, 'and you shall have what you like, if you will keep it quite to yourself, and never let any one else know it is there, and that you take it.'

Going to the aforesaid cupboard, Paul unlocked it, and drew forth a bottle of sparkling cider.

'See! I have remembered your favourite brand,' he said, as he poured out a glassful for her.

'Won't you have some to keep me company?' cried his mother.

'Just a little for once,' said Paul. But his mother did not know that he went and washed his moustache and rinsed his mouth out after it, for fear of carrying the faintest odour of it to his wife.

'You used to be so fond of it,' remarked the old lady when he returned, 'I've known you to drink off a pint at a time and ask for more.'

'Our tastes change sometimes as we get older,' replied Paul, with a little sigh which did not escape his mother's ear. Then they drew their chairs nearer to the fire, and chatted of home scenes, and of old days, and the Chitterlings, until the striking of a clock recalled them both to a sense of the hour.

'What a princely house you have, my son,' she whispered, as Paul was conducting her to her room, 'I had no idea you lived in such splendour. The Priory isn't a patch on it. I only wish the Chitterlings could see it.'

'Perhaps they will some day,' whispered her son in reply.

But Paul knew his mother was highly gratified with things in general, and he went to sleep with one at least of the loads of the past year safely off his mind.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE TRIAL AND VERDICTS

BREAKFAST at the Knoll was a very punctual meal, and when Mrs. Blake, senior, appeared at a little after nine, it was to find her host and hostess nearly through with their share of it.

In spite of the presence of a visitor, Maggie acquitted herself remarkably well, and a stranger looking in on that cheerful room and breakfast-table would have thought what a pretty scene it was — the bonny husband and wife; the beautiful old mother-in-law; and for fourth party at the round table, the fairy-looking kitten Snowball, as white as its namesake, and wearing a new satin bow in honour of the guest.

Seated on a dark-blue velvet cushion, brought up nearly to the level of the table by the under-propping of several large books, the lovely creature behaved exactly like a tiny spoilt child, playing with a salt-spoon till checked by Mr. Blake.

‘We call her Miss Blake,’ volunteered Maggie, putting a piece of fish on the diminutive plate, and watching with evident rapture the dainty way in which the fleecy paw conveyed the morsel to the pink mouth.

‘Snowball Blake is her name; and Mora calls hers Aurora Uraine.’

'I've had a letter from the Colonel saying that Mora was better yesterday,' said Paul to his wife, 'so it won't be long now before she comes home again, I hope.'

'You will stay when Mora comes,' said Maggie, turning those strange eyes of hers pleadingly to Mrs. Blake, senior, 'won't you? I don't want you to go. I want to have you and Mora both.'

'Well done, dear!' cried Paul. 'Mother, you don't know what a compliment Maggie is paying you. After that you can only say Yes.'

'Well, it depends on how long you want me for. Also, if I am to stay longer than a day or two,' replied the old lady, 'Maggie must call me mother.'

Maggie rose up hastily, and dropping down on her knees beside her husband's mother, laid her head against her shoulder, and whispered 'Mother.'

Then Paul saw his mother do what he had never known her to do before,—draw the pretty head to her bosom and pat it softly, and cry!

No, not when his father died in the midst of the harvest-field, and was carried still and silent into the homestead he had helped to build—nor when Paul, her only son, had refused to take to the farm, and had insisted on going to London to make his fortune in his own way,—had the strong, self-willed woman shed a tear, or shown any softness of grief or regret.

But now, as she sat there dropping one or two slow tears on the red-gold hair, Paul began dimly to understand that she might perhaps have longed for a daughter as passionately as he had longed now and then for a child of his own, and as helplessly; and the thought gave him a new light on his mother's character, a new insight into some of its depths, and made him sorry he had not sooner trusted her with the task of helping him care for his wife.

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So when he bade them both good-bye on his way to the grave business of the morning, he felt conscious of a gentler emotion in the thought of his mother than he had ever experienced before ; and it was as good a preparation as he could have had for the trials and difficulties of the difficult day that lay before him.

The first ordeal he had to face was when he appeared before the Grand Jury, to tell them in brief the story of his connection with the prisoners, and how in spite of his precautions against fire, and the duties imposed on the caretaker, the latter had allowed his most stringent rules to be broken, and his young wife had been made an unwilling party to the cruel deed.

‘ How much did you pay for Sellcuts’ Music Hall ? ’ asked the foreman.

‘ Thirty thousand pounds, including what I laid out on repairs and decorations,’ was the reply.

‘ For how much was it insured ? ’ was the next question.

‘ For twenty thousand,’ said Mr. Blake. ‘ I endeavoured to get it insured for its full value ; but the Company refused to take more than two-thirds of the risk owing to the close proximity of five liquor shops.’

‘ Have you received that twenty thousand yet ? ’

‘ No, I have not. The Company wants to deduct five thousand pounds for the salvage, and as I shall not get more than a hundred for it, I am going into the Law Courts over it. I may say that the books containing the account of the smallest transactions connected with my purchase, renovation, and insurance of Sellcuts’, from start to finish, are here in this Court, and that my solicitor has instructions to give the utmost facility to any one who wishes to examine them.’

So the Grand Jury found a true bill against Clarence

Dukelle and Elsie More, and the foreman presented it to the judge in due course.

The Court was densely packed ; and some of the ladies belonging to the Royal Brombridge Rangers were accommodated with seats near the judge, so as to give them a good view of the prisoners, whom they scanned with much narrowness through their lorgnettes, and even opera glasses.

Among the witnesses was Miss Colani, in an unusually small hat, and looking so much softer and more subdued that Mr. Blake hardly recognised her.

Her behaviour also was excellent, much to his relief ; and when called upon to go into the witness-box, she did so with such modest self-possession, and propriety of language, as to call forth a compliment from the judge.

She actually grew red when she alluded to the fearful language used by Dukelle, senior, when, on arriving at Victoria Station he found that neither Green Gooseberry nor Mrs. Blake was there to meet them. She was even civil to Mr. Macker, Q.C., when he suggested that she was a very foolish person for not seeing what was going on under her very nose.

'Did you know they were planning to take Mrs. Blake back to London with them ?' asked the barrister.

'Oh no !' she replied emphatically. 'If I had I would have called in a policeman. I knew she ought not to have so much drink as they were giving her ; and when I tried to stop her, her father took me away to the house in the Cut to have supper. I had never been there before, in fact this was my first visit to Brombridge. I came down to take the leading part in a sketch to oblige Mr. Blake, who had been dis-

appointed of some one else almost at the last minute. I knew nothing about the plot to take Mrs. Blake away, until we got into the train.'

After this she was allowed to leave the witness-box, and as she did so Lardy looked up for the first time, and their eyes met.

He was wretchedly haggard and pale, and his moustache and beard had grown long and straggly, so much so, that it was almost impossible to identify him with the swaggering, clean-shaven, showy young scoundrel, on whose faith she had relied a few years ago, and who had so basely left her and their helpless baby in the bitterness of the winter snow and frost to fend for themselves.

But it was a look of pity and not hatred that gleamed at him from the large dark eyes, and the prisoner suddenly dropped his face on his hands as they clasped the dock-rail, and sobbed.

But Miss Colani did not hear the sob or see the gesture, for there was a thundering noise in her head, her hands and feet felt prickly, and Mr. Blake's hand grasped her just in time to prevent her falling. She was taken into an anteroom and given some water, and revived quickly enough, but she shook so violently that Mr. Blake made her lie down on the hearthrug, with his overcoat for a pillow.

'How good you are to me,' she whispered, 'I don't deserve it.'

'I think you do,' he answered kindly. 'How is Charlie Simpson?'

'We are going to be married next week,' replied Miss Colani, 'and oh, I wish you would come to the wedding!'

'Who is going to give you away?' he asked. 'Hadn't you better invite me to do so?'

'Oh, Mr. Blake,' she cried, getting up on to her feet, 'do you mean to say you'll do that for me?'

'Of course I will,' he answered; for now that his mother had lifted a weight from his mind, he could afford, he thought, to help lift one from Miss Colani's.

'But I want you to let me tell you something that I haven't told and dare not tell any one else—not even Charlie,' she said, and she had hard work to keep from trembling again, and she turned her head away in shame. 'I'm in such an awful plight Lardy Dukelle and I hold a secret that only concerns ourselves,' she went on in a low voice. 'I cared for him once long ago, or thought I did, and if he lets it out my character is gone, and I don't think I could marry Charlie. He'd look down on me, and I've always held my head high. I couldn't bear it.'

Within himself Mr. Blake remembered that he had conjectured the episode Jane Elizabeth was referring to at the time, but had most carefully held his peace about it. Aloud he replied, 'Lardy's a wicked rascal, but I don't think he is quite so black a scoundrel as his father. I don't believe he'll give you away. There'd be nothing to gain by it.'

'Only spite,' groaned Jane Elizabeth.

'He doesn't look as if even spite would afford him any pleasure now,' said Mr. Blake. 'You keep your own counsel. I think you may trust him to keep his. It would tell against him with both judge and jury if he betrayed again the woman he betrayed years ago. You make Charlie a good wife and feed him well; you've all your work before you in taking care of him in the future. There's no need to live the past over again. Yes; I'll give you away on your wedding morning, never fear!'

Mr. Blake's name being called he hurried away, and

Jane Elizabeth, wiping her eyes, looked after him, saying, 'God bless you for a good man. You're worth a hundred of most of the men one meets.'

All day Miss Colani sat in the anteroom, having to be on hand in case she was recalled, but not daring to go into Court again lest she should stir up some cruel desire on Lardy Dukelle's part to do her a bad turn.

She need not have feared him. He was so broken-spirited at the knowledge that it was his own father who had put the police on his track, and overwhelmed at the sight of Elsie More, white and shadowy, in the dock beside him, that he had no thought of injuring his former victim.

At last the trial came to an end, and the judge's summing-up held the closely-packed Court in breathless suspense. Even the silly little poodle-faced wife of the captain of the Royal Brombridge Rangers forgot to fidget with her bangles, or use her lorgnettes, while he was speaking, and gazed at him instead of the prisoners.

'She has taken an active part in a most diabolical plot,' said the judge of Elsie More, 'and her crime is aggravated by the fact that she was living under the roof of the man whom she was so grievously wronging, and the woman whom she was helping the other conspirators to lure away from the care of a most kind and tender husband. But a plea for mercy has been raised on the score of her relations with the other prisoner at the bar, and the condition in which he has placed her—a condition under the circumstances of punishment and suffering, greater than anything he can be called upon to bear.

'As for the other prisoner, he too has pleaded guilty to the manslaughter of Henry Williams and Laura Dukelle, by assisting his father in the plot to burn

down the music hall in order to spite the lessee who had spent a great sum of money in purchasing it. The latter had also incurred the hate of both father and son by marrying Miss Margaret Dukelle, the prisoner's sister, to save her from her father's cruelty, thus depriving these two of her earnings.

'This prisoner also pleads guilty to having assisted in the attempt to get the young wife out of her husband's care, and thrust her back into the misery from which his noble act had saved her. Also to having used threats and bribes to induce the other prisoner to bring the sand from her master's hothouses and fill up the hydrant with the said sand, in order to delay the business of getting water, whereby the flames could be extinguished and the burning building saved.

'It now remains for you, gentlemen of the jury, to return your true and faithful verdict of guilty or not guilty on all these counts.'

It did not take the jury long to make up their minds, for in ten minutes after retiring to consider their verdict they returned to their places, and the foreman uttered the momentous word—'Guilty.'

'Clarence Dukelle,' said the judge, 'you have been found guilty of complicity in a most atrocious crime. You have used your power over an unhappy girl to drag her into the infamy of it, and the sentence I pass on you is that you be kept to penal servitude for ten years.'

'Elsie More, you also have been found guilty of complicity in a most atrocious crime, but inasmuch as you were under the domination of the man who has been your lover, and in consideration of your condition, the sentence I pass on you is that you be imprisoned for one year without hard labour.'

He had scarcely finished that last word when Elsie suddenly threw up her arms, and cried in a thin piercing voice—

‘Mr. Blake! Mr. Blake! Forgive me!’

Then amid all the stir and sensation of this unusual climax the prisoners were led away, and the business of the Court was over for the day.

‘May I be allowed to say a word to the female prisoner, my lord?’ asked Sellcuts’ manager, as his lordship sat signing sundry papers at a table in the judge’s room. All the colour had gone out of his strong face as he stood there, hat in hand, and to look at him one would have felt somehow that he too had received sentence of guilty from some unseen and spiritual court sitting in judgment on his sometime hardness.

‘It’s very good of you to trouble yourself about her,’ was the answer. ‘Pray see her by all means if you wish to.’

So one of the ushers was told off to conduct him to the female prisoners’ dreary waiting-room; and as Elsie sat on the hard bench in the gloom of the one dismal gas-jet, she heard the well-known voice saying close to her ear—

‘I’m sorry you’ve come to this, my girl. I’ll get Mrs. Paine to look after your mother while you are away.’

It was greatly to his credit that the first tears he had shed since boyhood when his father died, were shed now over the forlorn prisoner before him; and Elsie, drawing his hand to her cold and trembling lips, felt one of those drops fall on her face, and was baptized therewith into the gratitude that changes the character from barren winter into the hope of spring.

‘Won’t you send a message to James?’ he said

huskily, and then, pulling out his handkerchief, blew his nose with unnecessary violence to hide his emotion.

'Tell him not to think of me any more ; I'm not worth it.'

When Paul Blake returned to the general waiting-room to look for Miss Colani, a little note was handed to him telling him that she had left as soon as she was allowed to do so, in order to get back in time to fulfil her engagement at the Camelot. Telling him also how she blessed him for his goodness to her.

'It's a new sensation for people to be calling down blessings on my head,' he said to himself as soon as he had recovered from the perturbation caused by the closing scenes of the trial, 'but, by George, it's pleasanter than being cursed !'

So he called on Mrs. Paine on his way home, and placing a five-pound note in the hand she extended to him, said hastily, 'She's got a year without hard labour. Will you send that to her poor mother as an extra, and break it as gently as you can to her about it all?' and he was gone.

'He was much more cut up about it than one would have expected,' said Mr. Paine, coming in soon after. 'I was watching him to see if the sentence on Dukelle gave him any pleasure. He was as white as a sheet, and I don't think he knew that the people were cheering him as he came down the steps of the Town Hall. His hands were in his pockets, and he got into his carriage without once looking up. He nearly gripped my hand off at the finish when I congratulated him on the vindication it was, but he never said a word. But oh, I'm glad it's over ! It's an awful business this dooming human flesh and blood to misery and imprisonment, however richly deserved the penalty may be. No sunshine or laughter ; no running, shout-

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ing, games, sight of smiling faces, or change of scene ; no satisfaction of doing what you want to do for ten long years ! Truly the way of transgressors is hard. Some of them get paid out in this life, but I'm afraid the elder Dukelle won't.'

## CHAPTER XVI

### MORA IN ST. GEORGE'S HOSPITAL

MEANWHILE Mora Uraine was learning a new lesson in a new school, the school of pain and stillness.

Long before Mr. Blake's beautiful roses had faded she had become too ill to notice or be comforted by them, and the fever gained such hold of her that the circle of her thinking narrowed itself into feeble speculations as to whether it was too soon to ask for another drink, or whether the nurse would come again so that the position of her pillow might be altered to lessen the pain in her head, or a crease in her night-dress smoothed out to give relief to her tortured limbs.

She also lost count of time, and her father seemed to come and sit beside her bed, a sort of dark patch on the twilight that wasn't always there. Sometimes she recognised him, and imagined she was giving him a smile of recognition ; sometimes she merely identified him as the patch, and tried to keep awake to see when it moved away.

'There is no doubt that she is very ill,' the doctor had said to Harry Margetson on the fourth day after her admission. 'But she has youth, a good constitution, and a simple life on her side. Unless anything quite unforeseen arises, she ought to recover in less than a

month, and be able to leave the hospital. She must then go to some mild climate for change of air.'

So very unwillingly, but in deference to family opinion, Harry Margetson had departed to join his mother and sisters in Rome, and plan for Mora and the Colonel to join them there as soon as she was well enough to leave the hospital.

'Is he in love with her, do you think?' said pretty Alicia Margetson to her sister Grace, as they sat in the softly-shaded verandah of the hotel watching the crowd that passed to and fro in the warm afternoon sunshine, the day after their brother's arrival.

'It looks like it,' cooed the other. 'He looks older than he did three weeks ago. Anyhow it will be very nice to have her with us. He will take us with him then, instead of going off on his rambles alone.'

'It is most unusual for her to be in London, isn't it?' continued Alicia. 'I wonder where she and Uncle were staying, and how Aunt Uraine was talked over into allowing them to go? She'll say Mora's illness is a judgment on her.'

From which it will be inferred that Harry had not told his sisters the whole of the painful story of Mora's visit to the great city.

'Don't tell your cousins,' the Colonel had said, 'it would serve no good purpose, and make things embarrassing for my poor girl.'

So Harry had briefly written, saying, that while in London Mora had taken rheumatic fever, and was being carefully nursed at St. George's Hospital. Also, that her father was stopping at Grosvenor Place, so as to be as near to her as possible, and that he, Harry, was remaining behind with his uncle to keep him company.

Lady Margetson was like her brother, Colonel Uraine,

of an easy-going, good-tempered disposition, and generally disposed to let every one do as he liked, and have a good time. But she was also more worldly-wise than he, an advantage she had doubtless acquired from her marriage with a most common-sensed and practical, if somewhat irritable, man, Lord Bowdwin Margetson.

So having certain private opinions of her own as to the way in which the world—her world—jumps at conclusions, she had written a sympathetic letter to her son, praising him for his very practical kindness to 'poor dear Mora, and your Uncle Henry,' and begging him to come on at once to her, so that together they might plan out the best place for the invalid to recover her health in. 'Her father shall bring her to us as soon as she is well enough,' she wrote in conclusion.

Lord Bowdwin had also written to his son, ordering him to lose no time in joining his mother and sisters in Italy; and in his own terse way, he put the matter plainly: 'Mora has her father and the whole staff of St. George's to look after her; your mother and sisters have no one until you go to them; your brother and I are tied up here with the new gas-works for the next month. Go to Rome at once!'

So with Mora's birthday-book in his inside breast pocket, he went.

For two years he had admired his cousin and felt very kindly to her—'She's so real, and she has such beautiful eyes,' he had remarked once or twice to Grace.

He detested his Aunt Uraine with a deep, immovable detestation, due in part to the fact that she had always managed in some way to spoil the pleasure of his visits to Brombridge Hall; and also in part to her irritating rules and regulations concerning Mora's recreations and conduct.

For instance, when there had been the thickest of

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ice on the pond, at the end of the meadow where the fowls disported themselves, Mrs. Uraine had forbidden the three young people to slide there, 'lest there should be an accident,'—although the gardener had assured her it was strong enough to bear an elephant. Then when Harry and Ted had wanted to teach Mora skating, both boys being accomplished skaters, Mrs. Uraine had very decisively vetoed her daughter's learning to skate—'I don't want *her* to become fast and masculine,' she had said in a tone that sent her nephew out of the room with a red face, an angry heart, and the thought of his pretty sisters who skated so delightfully on the Round Pond in Kensington, to put a personal offence into his aunt's words.

When he had brought Mora the Persian kitten, he had asked for a kiss, and she, impulsive and warm-hearted, had given him so ready a response, that he returned to London full of the thought of her, and imagining her to be really attached to him.

But the last breath that fanned the smouldering spark of love into a flame, had been the indignation and the pity of her tragic turning to him and his mother in the hour of her bitter misery, and having his own home door, as it were, slammed in her face.

In that brief half hour of madly rushing about Hyde Park in pursuit of her, he had forgotten his ridicule of her untasteful dresses, her dowdy, old-fashioned hats, cheap and often shabby gloves, her want of dainty care, and the horribly unbecoming way in which her hair was done up when he put the white kitten into her arms, and had remembered only the dark eyes turned up to him with joy and gratitude, and the soft round lips that touched his so frankly for a moment.

He had not felt like this about any other girl. He was always more or less uncomfortable with his sisters'

bosom friends, because their elaborate civility to him, and the skilful way in which they squeezed him out of their *élite-à-têtes*, informed him forcibly enough that they didn't want him. 'How rough his manners are!' exclaimed one nymph to another within his hearing at a dance one night ; and identifying the young lady soon after, he scratched her name off his programme, and did not dance with any one except his sisters for the rest of the time.

Mora was different. Her remonstrances were frank enough on the score of his manners, but they hurt neither his vanity nor his self-respect ; and she had told him more than once that he was good-looking, and not being sure on that important point, it had comforted him greatly.

So when he entered his mother's sitting-room in the quiet hotel in the Piazza Avanzi, she saw something new in his face and manners, heard a deeper note in his voice, and being his mother and loving him well, held her peace about it, and thought much of whether cousin marriages are desirable.

'Anyhow I'm glad he's here, and not there,' she said to herself ; nevertheless she aided and abetted him in all his endeavours to find a charming villa where they could sojourn, instead of as now at an hotel, and where Colonel Uraine and Mora could join them.

As for Mora, after a fortnight of pain and fever, she was lying in her quiet corner in the ward feeling lazily comfortable and contented.

Her temperature had gone down to normal, the doctor had told her, and she could move without pain, and was beginning to feel hungry.

She was expecting her father, and languidly anticipating the pleasure of telling him how much better she felt ; she also meant to get him to write to her cousin

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Harry, and ask him to let her have her birthday book at once.

In front of her at the foot of the bed were some beautiful white lilies Colonel Uraine had brought her, and by her side a bowl of Neapolitan violets, with a few sweet ones intermixed, which Maggie had sent ; while on the quilt lay a letter from Mrs. Uraine.

It was a kind letter, and had cost the writer far more self-control to write than Mora knew ; but it was very stiff, and the polite way in which it treated her leaving home, and her illness, was distinctly chilly.

'Still, it's better than it might have been,' sighed Mora ; 'other girls' mothers would have been to see them before now.'

'See, I'm going to tie back your hair with some ribbon,' said the nurse, holding up some shining blue satin. 'Your father will be quite pleased when he sees how nicely you are getting on.'

'It reminds me of my beautiful white kitten,' said Mora, 'you've no idea how lovely she is, nurse. Her name is Aurora. I must ask father how she is when he comes.'

The putting on of the ribbon had just been finished, and Mora had taken her first peep at her thin white face in the glass—a privilege strenuously denied her by the nurse until this morning—when the sound of masculine feet in the ward caused a putting-away of such frivolous things as toilet luxuries, and Mora was left alone for a while.

By and by the screens parted, and her father came in, followed by Mr. Blake and Ted.

It was a joyful meeting, albeit a quiet one ; for the doctor had impressed on them downstairs that though the patient was so much better, a relapse was to be dreaded.

Ted had not seen his sister since that sombre evening of their revolt, and he was not prepared for the tremendous change illness had made in her usually plump face; consequently, in spite of his downy upper lip, he sobbed for a moment or two after he had kissed her.

Mr. Blake was also somewhat shocked at the change, but being older and more experienced, he hid his feelings under a little jest—

‘So you’ve been learning how to do your hair up, have you?’ he said, lifting the long thick strand of brown hair, round which the nurse had so tastefully tied the satin bow, with one finger from the pillow on which it lay.

Then he went on more gravely, and Mora noticed that he had a careworn look in his eyes that she had never seen before, and was somewhat pale for him; also that his voice was lower in tone.

‘I have only come for a moment with your father’s permission, to tell you what we have planned for you as soon as the doctors will let you carry it out. My mother has been visiting us while you have been ill, and she is taking Maggie back to Bickerton with her. When you are able to go, your father and I will take you on to join them there, and most likely you will stay in that lovely little seaside place for a month. What do you think of it?’

‘Oh!’ said Mora, and it was all she could say, but her face expressed the rest for her, and she put out her thin white hand and touched Mr. Blake’s as it rested on the sheet near her. Then suddenly her face clouded, and she asked—

‘But will mother let me go, do you think?’

‘Yes, your mother is all right,’ replied her father, ‘she is having your wardrobe seen to.’

'I wish she would let me see to it myself when I get better, father,' cried Mora imploringly. 'She'll have that awful gray stuff made up for me, and I hate it. Do ask her to let my things be bought in London, and let you and me choose them.'

'No, I don't think you must do that,' said Mr. Blake gently; 'you have given your mother a hard knock, remember, and she is trying to heal it by taking trouble on your account,' and he rose to go. 'Never mind if the things are unbecoming, it won't matter to us in Devon; and you won't have time to think about clothes with the sea, and the sun, and the gulls to look at. Good-bye, my dear,' and he went, the Colonel going with him.

When they had gone, Ted took the place vacated by Mr. Blake, and communicated the tremendous news that had brought him up to London that morning with his father and their mutual friend.

'Only think of it, Mora! Mr. Paine called on mother! He is a brick and no mistake; and we don't know what he said, but he has got mother to let me study with a tutor, a friend of Mr. Carmichael; and Bowdwin wrote me saying he'll get Uncle Margetson to take me into their works if I get on well.'

'Are you going to study at home?' asked his sister eagerly, for Brombridge Hall without Ted would be a very dull place she thought.

'Yes, for a year, but oh I am so glad! We've been to see Mr. Ross this morning. He's such a nice fellow, and mother won't dislike him because he knows the Rev. Samuel Patchilove, you know, the Panjandrum man. He's fond of dogs too, and he says Magpie is a good breed.'

'Did you bring Magpie up with you?' asked Mora.  
'Yes,' said her brother, 'you've no idea how mother

has taken to Aurora since you left. You know how she hates cats. Well, she has had Aurora's basket brought down to her room, and she actually lets her sleep there of a night. She told me to bring Magpie up with me, in case he should fly at Aurora if I were not by.'

'Ted, will you do something for me?' said Mora, when she had recovered a bit from the surprise caused by her mother's change of mind on the subject of Aurora, which she had never dared take into Mrs. Uraine's room because of her hatred of animals.

'I want you to write to Harry, and ask him to return me my little birthday book. He has it, and I miss it so. There's some notepaper in the locker, and nurse will let you have the ink off the ward table, if you ask her.'

So Ted did as he was asked, and when the letter was duly put into an envelope and stamped, he rose to go.

'Oh, there's something else I meant to tell you,' he said. 'They caught that Lardy Dukelle ; and he's got ten years' penal servitude for helping his father burn down Sellcuts', and the other bad things he did. Also that housemaid who was at the Blakes' has got a year.'

'I only hope the other two will get caught, and be punished as they deserve,' cried Mora, as she kissed her brother good-bye.

Late that night Mora lay awake instead of going to sleep. She was neither feverish nor in pain, but only broadly and inexorably wakeful, and hearing amid the silence and occasional interruptions of the ward, a voice saying, 'You have given your mother a hard knock, remember.'

Over and over again she tried to shut her inward ear, and listen only with the outer one to the sounds that came, sometimes muffled, sometimes clear and sharp, over the soft murmur of sleep around her. But

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all in vain ; and above the distant rumble of the constant traffic, the occasional shriek of a railway whistle, or a cab-call, she could hear that insistent 'you have given,' and have to go again in fancy over all the rest of the sentence.

Or she would be drowsing off, and the deep chime of Big Ben recall her with the words, 'A hard knock, remember,' to absolute awakeness again.

At last she ceased to drive the voice away, and began to think how far it was true.

Her mother was trying to heal the hurt of the knock by putting herself about on behalf of the one who had given it ! Then the pathos of her caring for the cat forced itself on Mora, and that so overwhelmingly that for the first time since the dreadful night of her leaving home, she began to cry.

Bitter tears they were. Tears of contrition for that 'hard knock ' ; tears of regret for all that had led to it ; tears of self-condemnation that gratitude for all her father's undeviating kindness had not prevented her from running away from him ; tears at the thought of how little pleasure her mother must have had in the monotonous years of her uneventful life, and of how very little she herself had actually contributed to it.

It also came over her with grief and shame that she had made very little return to the Blakes for all the joy they had given her. She had been glad enough to go in to the Knoll whenever she had a chance, and had taught Maggie to like some kinds of needlework ; also together they had cleaned out the aviary and kept the birds in good order, and Mr. Blake had thanked her more than once for her good influence over his wife. But when the truth faced her as it did this night for the first time, amid the tears and sorrow of introspection started by Mr. Blake's words that

she had been both selfish and dishonourable even in her friendship, a new process began within her, and a most wholesome though painful one it was. She began to see that Mora Uraine had not loved Maggie Blake with a love unselfish enough to do right for its sake. She could see now that she ought to have told her mother the whole truth of her visits, and her wish to help Maggie's weakness, and if necessary have fought a good fight in open field for the rights of a righteous friendship, taking the possible consequences of so doing ; but that to carry on the intimacy in a clandestine way so far as her mother went, was not treating that mother fairly, nor acting as if the Blakes' hospitality were worth striking a blow for. To be sure she had struck a blow—'given a hard knock ' as Mr. Blake said ; but it had not been struck in the right spirit, nor given in the right way, nor even aimed at the right thing.

'I've been very selfish. I've taken all I could get from father, from mother, from the Blakes, and I've given nothing in return that it cost me anything to give. I'm very useless. I don't do anything well enough to be paid for it, like the nurses here, or that poor little dressmaker over there who keeps her parents ; and I've done nothing to help any of the poor people in Brombridge. When Mr. Carmichael asked me to teach in his Sunday-School I refused, though mother would have let me do that if I'd asked. To be sure my gloves are shabby as a rule, but that wasn't the only reason. Oh dear ! I shall be glad to be well again to try and be worth something.'

'How is it you are not asleep ?' said the night nurse, who had peeped in to see if she was all right, 'are you in pain ?'

'No,' replied Mora, 'I'm thinking. What time is it ?'

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'Time you ought to be fast asleep. You mustn't think at night, you must turn on your side and go to sleep. Do you want anything?'

'Yes, I want to go to sleep, and forget, but I can't.'

The nurse had often heard that cry before, and had generally answered it in one short phrase—

'You must.'

But Mora was not one to be cut-and-dried with, and both the night and day nurses had become fond of the young lady who was so docile and creditable a patient to nurse; so she whispered, 'If you'll promise to go to sleep after it, I'll bring you a cup of my tea, hot and fresh.'

So Mora promised, and while the nurse went for the tea, she lay watching the flickering of the ward fire on that part of the screen which caught its light. Suddenly the familiar words of the Confession rushed into her mind as vividly as if the congregation at St. Columba were droning them out after the vicar: 'We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us.' 'I've said them often enough,' thought Mora, 'but I never felt them till now. How does it go on? "But Thou O Lord have mercy upon us miserable offenders. Spare Thou them O God which confess their faults. Restore Thou them that are penitent according to Thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father for His sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life to the glory of Thy holy name—Amen."

'I'd no idea it was such a beautiful prayer,' she continued to herself, 'it seems to fit me exactly. I wonder what the man had done who wrote it? He must have felt then just what I feel now. I wish the morning would

come. I'll try and write to mother—poor mother. I've treated her very badly, and given her a hard knock.'

Thus Mr. Blake had stood by Mora at the turning-point of her life ; and at the parting of the ways had given her so masterly a push in the right direction as to ensure her onward progress in the road of all that is noble, lovely, and of good report.

He had spoken the word in season ; had dropped a good seed into a good soil, and the coming years were to witness the result of that straight, simple, kindly gift of truth-telling which so distinguished him both in his business and personal relationships, and which had caused such a salutary arrest of thought in Mora. One of the first consequences of which was that Mrs. Uraine received so touching a letter from Mora—a letter written in a shaky hand and in pencil, and blistered here and there with tears—that when on that very afternoon following its receipt, Mr. Bleby, in the act of cutting Mrs. Uraine's hair, ventured to remark that there was a deal of gossip going round the town about Miss Uraine's going to London, he received a very well-administered snub from the person who could most adequately administer one—

'I'm afraid you must be fond of gossip yourself, Mr. Bleby, or you wouldn't listen to it. It's a pity my daughter can't go to London to visit her aunt without you and Brombridge gossiping about it.'

'I hope Miss Uraine is well,' said Mr. Bleby undauntedly, though he would like to have given his lady's hair a sharpish pull.

'Thank you,' replied Mrs. Uraine, 'she is better than she has been. The chill was too severe a one to be lightly shaken off, so we are thinking of sending her into Devonshire for a change.'

'I was not aware that she had been ill,' said Mr.

Bleby, anxious to glean a little more information if possible.

'No, I suppose not,' said his client calmly. 'You see we could not expect Dr. Slaney to go all the way to London to attend her, and the Colonel is well satisfied with the treatment she has had. The best of everything is to be had in London, Mr. Bleby.'

So the hairdresser knew that it was of no use asking any more questions about Miss Uraine, and he turned the conversation to the trial and sentences.

'Mr. Blake's housemaid has got a year,' he remarked.

'She would have had more if she hadn't been so ably defended,' replied Mrs. Uraine.

'I should like to know who paid the fee of the Q.C. who defended her,' said Mr. Bleby. 'They say he doesn't so much as open his mouth under fifty guineas.'

'I can tell you who paid,' said the lady; 'and it does him great credit whatever other sins he may have been guilty of. It was Mr. Blake.'

'It was Mr. Blake, was it?' repeated the former deacon of Ebenezer; 'well now, considering the condition she was in, and that she'd been in his service some time, I don't like the looks of his paying to have her defended. It looks very shady to my mind.'

Now if Mr. Bleby had cast a similar aspersion on the music-hall man's character only a month before, Mrs. Uraine would have agreed with him, and not have perceived the astounding cruelty and wickedness of the speech. He had said even worse things to her from time to time in his rôle of purveyor of the latest gossip, and she had listened to them, if not with actual acquiescence, at least without anything more hostile than a deprecatory 'Oh, that can't be true, surely!'

But this afternoon his insinuation filled her with

dismay and anger, partly because she had been much pleased with Mr. Blake's courteous treatment of her the night of her visit, and partly because he had been so faithful a friend in a time of crushing mortification and anxiety.

'Mr. Bleby,' she said, rising from her chair and looking at him with haughty disfavour, 'I must request you to keep your very unsavoury conjectures to yourself. You know as well as I do that the man who seduced that wretched girl was beside her in the dock. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. It's most unchristian,' and she actually walked out of the room; and the only pity of it was that neither Mora nor Ted was there to see her do it, and that she had not done so long before when Mr. Bleby had similarly transgressed.

'Well, I never!' said the astonished man, as he packed his things into his bag, and shook his head viciously at the diagram of the Twelve Tribes of Israel which hung soberly framed in black by the side of the looking-glass.

'It's the mark of the Beast,' he muttered thoughtfully, '*she's* come under his influence. Who'd have thought it? Well, I never!' and as he went out of the house he waited till the door was shut, and then turning round he looked up at Mrs. Uraine's bedroom window, shook his fist at it and said, 'Ah!' with a long-drawn intonation of mingled menace and deprecation.

## CHAPTER XVII

### JANE ELIZABETH'S WEDDING

IT was a clear, bright day in March, and London, including Grosvenor Place, looked almost festive in the wintry sunshine. The sulky, sooty-looking trees in Green Park were sparkling with frost, and outlined here and there with a remnant of frozen snow, while the sky was almost blue above the smokeless expanse of Hyde Park.

In the cosy morning-room of the Margetsons' luxurious house sat Mora with a book in her hand, ready-dressed to go out.

She had left St. George's a week ago ; and though she was glad enough to be well again and out of the trammels of medicine, and invalid diet, doctors, and nurses, she had parted regretfully from the now familiar ward, its tragedy and comedy, the kindness and care, and the health-giving example of so many comparatively young people engaged in the serious business of serving their sick and pain-stricken fellow-creatures.

Her father had presented a suitable thank-offering to the hospital, and Mr. Blake had whispered to her that if she would take great care of his wife while they were at the sea together, he would get something nice for her to give her own special doctor, also the day and

'The uses ; and Mora, whose ideal of the greatest well,' she was the thought of giving presents, was so far in a very happy frame of mind.

To be sure, she was a little perturbed at the news brought by the post of the night before from Italy stating that Harry Margetson was on his way home on business, and was anticipating the pleasure of escorting his uncle and cousin to Rome on his return there.

'I'm so glad you have promised I shall go to Devonshire,' she remarked to her father. 'I'd much rather take care of Maggie when Mr. Blake is not with her, and feel I'm of use, than be taken care of even by Aunt Margetson and be idle,' which showed the Colonel that Mora's illness had done her a great deal of good already.

'Where are we going for this wedding ?' she asked, shutting the book, and rising from the big easy-chair.

The Colonel was writing busily, and he merely shook his head, murmuring, 'I really don't know, my dear.'

So Mora planted herself by the window, and looked out on the animated scene in the wide street below.

By and by there were steps and a rustle outside the door, and she turned quickly, expecting to see Lizbeth, who was trying to make up for past delinquencies by extra humility and assiduity.

But instead of Lizbeth, it was beautiful Maggie Blake who walked in, holding her husband's hand.

The joy of the two friends at meeting again was almost painful to witness, and both the Colonel and Mr. Blake were overwhelmed by the outbursts of endearments and caresses that ensued.

With some girls a show of affection amounts to a rather revolting sham, and is usually enacted for the benefit of some man or men ; but in this case nothing

of show or sham was to be dreamed of, the dash of being outside any such considerations by the lim. of a feeble and unresourceful intellect, and the his above them by sheer sincerity and exuberance healthy emotion.

'When you've done mopping,' said Mr. Blake, who had been using his pocket-handkerchief with some energy, 'perhaps you'll allow a mere man to suggest that you need straightening out after all this fuss, and that it's time to start.'

So there being some preliminary patting of untidy hair, Sellcuts' manager proposed that, as the morning-room was not the proper place for dressing in, the two had better go to Mora's bedroom, and look sharp about it.

'Oh, Maggie darling, are those for me?' cried Mora in ecstasy, for Maggie led her to the bed, on which lay a black velvet hat trimmed with brown fur, like her own, a boa, and a muff to match, also a pair of kid gloves.

'Paul was afraid you would not be warm enough, and he let me buy these. He chose them, and I paid the bill,' said Maggie with childish pride.

Mora hardly knew whether to laugh or to cry as she stood before the glass loving what was on her head and her hands for the first time in her life, and realising what a decorum and dignity of mind is the outcome of good clothes, if you have taste and sense enough to know what good clothes are. But Mr. Blake's voice recalled her.

'I'll go without you if you don't come at once!' he shouted.

As they were going downstairs, the Colonel and Maggie in front, and Mora beside Mr. Blake, she whispered, 'I can't thank you for all you've done for me. I'll try and deserve it.'

'That's right,' he retorted. 'They suit you very well'

The Colonel did not go with them. He had a great deal to do, he said, and he hated weddings, also he knew Mora was in safe care.

It was not a long drive, the carriage had a hot tin in it; and Mora, who had never seen a wedding before, was all excitement, and unconscious of recent invalidism. Maggie, who was soon exhausted, was content to lean back silent, holding her friend's hand.

'Miss Colani, or rather Miss Brown, who is to become Mrs. Simpson to-day, is a very old friend of mine,' said Paul to Mora. 'I made her acquaintance when I was foreman of the Conway Building Works.'

It struck Mora suddenly, as he spoke, that this was the first time she had ever heard Mr. Blake speak of his earlier days.

'Was she on the stage then?' asked Mora.

'Oh yes, she had been on about two years. Our firm built the Camelot Theatre, and that's how I became interested in the stage.'

'You used to act, usen't you?' continued Mora.

'Yes; but I got tired of it,' and his face became grave and careworn again.

They had now arrived at the church, and already there was quite a large crowd on each side of the strip of cocoanut matting that had been laid down by order of the bride-elect, who had seen to the arrangements herself, and made the verger understand that she wasn't going to be married anyhow. A front seat in the chancel had been reserved for Mr. Blake's party, and already the church was fairly full; and Dickie Carter, who had a decent-sized bouquet pinned to his coat, conducted them to their places with his usual

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grumpy surliness, slightly sweetened with a dash of unusual importance.

'Take care of my overcoat,' whispered Paul to his wife and Mora; and, looking wonderfully smart with a white orchid in his buttonhole, he sauntered down to the entrance to wait for the bride, and commence his parental duties as soon as she should arrive.

Soon there was a shout of excitement from the crowd, and an eager jostling closer together to get a good view, as a carriage and pair of white horses drove up.

'Don't push so, 'Liza; you're a-knockin' my 'at off, yer silly kipper!'

'It's a 'ired one,' said a groggy voice, as Mr. Blake stepped up to the open door to receive the bride and take her on his arm, with all due ceremony, up the aisle.

Jane Elizabeth knew that voice and the rusty habiliments of the owner; and her swift brain coined the thought, 'How did that old Judy know about it?' But she was on her best behaviour, and passed Mrs. Best with an air of being wholly unconscious of her presence, to the great discomfiture of that lady, who had planned a little scene for the diversion of one or two of her boon companions who had accompanied her, and was prepared for a renewal of hostilities over the *corpus vile* of Mr. Simpson.

Jane Elizabeth looked remarkably handsome in her ivory satin dress and white veil, and the scent of the orange-blossoms almost filled the chancel. She was far too happy to allow past irritations to interrupt present peace, and it was with a merry smile she informed her bridegroom in a whisper that his landlady was waiting to take him home.

It is possible that Mr. Blake knew where the

exquisite bouquet had come from, for even Miss Colani had not dreamed of such orchids and lilies as those she held in a hand that trembled with satisfaction.

As the two passed Maggie and Mora, the latter turned very cold, and her heart beat violently.

There are some moments that are so unbearable from the fact that the beauty they contain is a pageant on which one is gazing as an outsider, and not an event in which one is taking part, and Mora had hard work not to cry as she looked on the sheen of the bride's satin, and caught the expression on Mr. Blake's face.

Two lovely little girls in white, carrying baskets of white narcissus and yellow roses, followed as bridesmaids, while Mr. and Mrs. Mackay, and other theatrical lights, formed a group of much striking vividness in colour and good looks around the bridal party, Dickie Carter hovering about silently on the outskirts to see that all went right.

As for the bridegroom himself, no one would have recognised him as the pale and careworn-looking man who had fainted so easily under the glare of a policeman's lantern, the first night of *Mephistopheles*. Domestic peace and creature comfort had laid on him many ounces of solid flesh; while hourly contact with steady, all-round feminine capability had given his brain a sense of security, and made his eye sparkle with quicker life, and his cheek glow with healthy colour.

'I never saw a chap alter so quickly for the better,' whispered Stuart Mackay to his neighbour.

And now the clergyman had come in, and the service proceeded smoothly to its close. Mr. Charles Simpson was soon deftly pushing back Mrs. Charles Simpson's veil to give her their first kiss of wedded

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life. Mr. Blake followed suit as having acted *in loco parentis*; and then the party made their way to the vestry.

Meanwhile the organ was pealing forth the Wedding March, and there was some kind of a scuffle going on at the entrance.

There was much turning of heads and gazing towards the centre door, when a woman's voice cried shrill, but somewhat inarticulately—

'Lemme go in! I've ash good a right ash any one, I tell yer! I kep' 'im alive, that's wot I did.'

'Come, move on, missis!' said a policeman, taking the somewhat tipsy person out of the porch and down the steps. 'You don't come inside, anyhow.'

'Ere's room 'ere,' said another voice, 'an' so they won't let yer in? Well, I do call it a shame, an' you actin' a mother's part by 'im.'

'Yesh! I've been more than a mother to 'im,' replied Mrs. Best, beginning to weep, and feeling once more for the flat bottle of unsweetened from which she had been drawing much liquid support during the trying ceremony.

By this time the bride and bridegroom had come down the aisle, and were passing out to the carriage, closely followed by Mr. and Mrs. Mackay, who were returning with them to the festive meal.

A very thin girl with a chattering jaw and blue nose, pulled the bridegroom by the arm just as he rose up from pushing his bride's train into the carriage.

'Good luck to yer, Mr. Simpson! Don't you forget Maria as waited on yer when you was the "front parlour.'

'Good gracious, Charlie,' cried his wife, 'she looks starved to death!' and in the high happiness of her new estate the genuine kindness of her sterling nature asserted itself, and she leaned forward to the miserable girl, saying—

'You come round to us in an hour's time, my dear, and we'll give you a good dinner.'

'You'll remember where it is,' said Mr. Simpson, putting his head out as they drove away; and while the famished Maria was repeating it to herself to make sure, Mrs. Best's treble was heard quavering in broken accents as she was led off by her friend—

'I kep' 'im alive—I—kep'—'im—alive.'

By this time the Blakes' carriage had come, and the three returned to Grosvenor Place.

'No. We musn't come in,' said Mr. Blake decidedly. 'You are not quite strong yet; and when you've had lunch you must go and lie down. We don't want to have to nurse you when you come to Bickerton.'

So there was a tender farewell between the two young women, and as Mr. Blake shook hands with Mora he gave her the orchid out of his coat.

'Mr. Margetson is here,' said Lizbeth. 'He is with the Colonel in the smoking-room.'

Without waiting to remove hat or boa, Mora rushed off, and was met by her cousin in the corridor.

'Why, how you've altered!' he cried.

'And how you've grown!' she retorted mockingly—the remark on one's growth having been an accredited form of ironical family greeting in days gone by.

Harry was silent. It was not growth only on Mora's part, it was more like substitution. For one thing, she had on the first decent hat he had ever seen her in, he remarked within himself, and it was most becoming. But it wasn't the hat that made the difference. And as the time passed on he began to realise that the former rawness of manner and childish pitch of voice had passed away, and her attitude and movements had become dignified and graceful.

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After lunch the two were left alone together, and Harry plunged at once into his plans.

'Father wanted Bowdwin to go to Scotland to interview some one for him, and I suggested his sending me instead. I shall be there two days, and then come back for you and Uncle Uraine; and we'll go on to Italy together. Oh, it will be so jolly, you can't think!'

'But, Harry, I'm not going to Italy; I'm going to Devonshire with the Blakes,' said Mora. 'Hasn't father told you?'

'By Jove, no!' cried the young man, getting red very suddenly. 'Do you mean to say you prefer going with those Blakes to being with us?'

'It's not a case of preference, it's a case of making a promise and keeping it,' said Mora as kindly as she could, for she saw that it would be a greater disappointment to him than she had guessed.

Harry did not reply, but walked to the window, where he stood for a few minutes trying not to be rude in the rising of his anger.

'You don't understand how I feel about Maggie Blake, Harry,' Mora went on, 'you would if you had seen her for yourself. She had such an awfully unhappy life before Mr. Blake married her. Her mind is very weak. She's extremely beautiful and most lovable. Mr. Blake worships her; and I love her—well—I can't explain how much.'

'That's no business of mine—of ours,' said her cousin, almost brutally; 'she may be a perfect Venus for beauty, but *we* have the first claim upon you. You are making yourself very cheap in choosing these theatre people in preference to us, your relations. Especially after such an episode as the one you have just passed through.'

'Harry!' cried Mora, and there was that in her voice which recalled him to himself.

'I beg your pardon,' he said penitently, 'I didn't mean to hurt you. I ought not to have thrown it up at you. But I am so vexed about your going to Devonshire, instead of coming to the charming place we've taken in the Pincian Hills.'

'Sit down there,' said Mora, pointing to a chair, 'I want to say something to you that I can't say while you are moving about. I would have come to you and the others, if you had been the first to ask me; but the Blakes' invitation came first, and father, mother, and I accepted it gratefully. Besides, I shall be more useful to them than ever I could be to you; you would all do everything for me, whereas the Blakes will want me to do a great deal for them. I know which will be best for me. I've been very useless in the past.'

'Good heavens, Mora!' cried her cousin, starting up again, 'you don't mean to say you've got views?'

'Yes, I have,' said Mora laughing, his horror was so real and so funny.

'Oh dear,' he groaned, 'then it's all up with you. You'll grow to be a second edition of your mother.'

'Possibly,' said Mora, rather resentfully; 'there are many worse women in the world than my mother.'

'True,' he retorted, 'but not many more disagreeable, or why did you run away from her to us?'

There was an ominous silence, for, though the words were true in fact, the bad taste of them was execrable, and Harry knew it. But, in pity for him, it must be remembered his instinct told him that Mora was receding farther and farther from his grasp, and that in proportion as she receded she became of more value to him.

'Harry,' she said, in a strange, cold voice, 'you have

a little book of mine. Will you be so kind as to give it me, and then we'll ring for some tea.'

With quick, angry step he went out of the room, slamming the door behind him, and it startled his cousin so much that it made her feel sick and cold, and she rang the bell in alarm.

'Send father to me at once,' she said faintly; but before the Colonel could reach her she had fainted, and was lying on the floor when he came in.

When Harry returned with the book—and he had taken a long time in getting it—he found the Colonel bending over his daughter with a glass of water, Lizbeth and her mother each busy rubbing feet and hands, and Mora lying white and still on the sofa, but with her eyes open.

'She's come round,' said Colonel Uraine, 'but she isn't strong yet. She's done too much to-day.'

'We'd better have some tea at once,' said Harry and he took his cousin's cold, limp hand from 'Lizbeth, and began rubbing it with much vigour.

'I'm all right now,' said Mora, raising her head. 'I turned so sick, father dear. My feet are very cold,' but she did not look at Harry.

'I'll get a hot-water bag filled,' said the caretaker, and by and by Mora was sitting in the big easy-chair again, her feet resting on a hot bag on a stool, and a fur rug over her knees. In her pocket also was the lost little book, and for joy of its recovery she was trying to forget her cousin's rudeness, and be grateful for all his kindness to her.

'I'm very sorry,' he murmured when the Colonel left them alone together to finish some letters for post, 'but you don't know what an awful disappointment it is to me.'

'Don't you think it's much better it should come

now instead of later on?' said Mora, little dreaming of the deeper truth that lay beneath the words she was uttering. 'You hate views, as you call them, and one lesson I've learnt since I've been ill is, that you must have views, and try and carry them out if you are to be of any use in the world.'

'Oh, that's all right,' he assented, 'as far as men go who want to become famous, or women who have to earn their living; but ladies ought only to be beautiful and well dressed, and know how to manage a house and entertain properly.'

'And you don't need views for that, I suppose?' remarked Mora slyly.

'No, of course not,' was the reply; 'these things come to well-born women by instinct.'

'Do they? Well, I guess they'll have to come to me when I need them by some other way, for I seem to have no instinct either for dress or beauty.'

'Oh, yes you have!' cried her cousin with the utmost sincerity. 'You'll be quite a beauty some day; and that hat you wore this morning suits you to perfection.'

'It was Maggie Blake's instinct that gave me that,' said Mora, watching the effect of the announcement.

'Do you let her give you clothes?' he asked solemnly, and with an intonation of unutterable surprise.

'We are like sisters, Harry. You don't understand.'

'No, I don't,' he said shortly, adding, a little pompously, 'I shall have to see what this Maggie Blake is like. It's a serious matter your being so intimate. To be sure the husband seems a decent sort of fellow.'

'Well, really I can't see what business it is of yours, Harry,' and the colour began to rise in Mora's cheeks.

'It's much more my business than you can understand,' retorted the young man passionately, and Mora, dreading another storm, rose hastily, saying—

'Well, if it is any comfort to you, let me tell you I've seen Mr. Blake all hours of the day, and I've never seen him when he wasn't a gentleman through and through—to his wife, to me, to every one,' and she passed out of the room.

'By George!' muttered Mr. Harry Margetson, and he walked up and down with much misspent energy until the first dinner gong sounded.

'By Jove!' he ejaculated, as he took down a pipe from the rack in the smoking-room.

Early next morning he had to start for Scotland, and gave orders for a solitary breakfast, so that he might get away without saying good-bye to Mora.

But she innocently enough thought it seemed a rather heartless thing to let him go without some kind of cousinly care and thanks after all his kindness.

'He was very rude,' she said to herself, 'but that is his way. He has always been rough in his manners, but he's been a very good friend to me.' So when Harry appeared, carrying his overcoat and gloves, which he threw down on to the writing-table in the morning-room, not expecting to find any one else there, Mora's voice fairly made him jump as she exclaimed, 'Good morning! You see I'm down first after all.'

'Oh, but you oughtn't to have got up so early,' he said; but he looked quite pleased that she had done so.

After all it was much nicer to part friends, and pleasanter to have a lady-cousin to pour out your coffee and wait on you, than the daughter of your caretaker.

'You'll forget that I was rough to you yesterday,' he

said ruefully, after Lizbeth had announced that the hansom was at the door.

'And you need not remember that I have views,' rejoined Mora, giving him the usual cousinly kiss. 'Take care of yourself,' she shouted as he drove away. 'And now to get ready for Devonshire!' she cried. 'Oh, how thankful I am I'm not going with Harry to Italy. I don't feel at home with him somehow, and I always do with the Blakes.'

When Saturday came Mora and her father bade farewell to Grosvenor Place, and, joining Mr. Blake at Paddington, started out on the long journey to Bickerton.

Mora had travelled very little, consequently she was as pleased as a child at the novelty of it.

To be sure her mother had dashed some well-meant cold water on her from afar, sending her a scholastically-worded letter on the chastened and watchful spirit in which journeys should be undertaken, owing to our awful nearness to Eternity on those occasions, and she had enclosed a gloomy little tract, entitled 'Sudden Death on the Railway,' which depicted with much unction the gaiety of a numerous picnic party on setting forth, and the woe of their sadly-diminished numbers on returning, owing to a collision.

However, she had added a postscript containing less unction and more humanity, so Mora put the letter and tract away in the bottom of her bag, and slipped the postscript into her birthday book owing to its running thus: 'Your cat is really quite nice. Be sure you tell me what the house at Bickerton is like. You will have to sew the tuckers into your new black dress. Miss Gobbler had no time to do it.'

'I wish it would go on for ever,' sighed Mora when, about the middle of the afternoon, they left Exeter

behind and began to catch sight of the sea and the rocks at Dawlish.

At about six they reached Bickerton, and there on the platform was Mr. Blake's mother and his wife.

'We shall all walk up to the house,' said Paul; 'they'll send up the luggage.'

It was a most delicious evening. So balmy and sweet it was difficult to think of the cold raw fog left behind but a few hours ago in London, and Mora could hardly refrain from running and leaping up the straggling road to the farm.

'It is five years since I last saw the dear old place,' said Mr. Blake as they stood and gazed up at the long rambling house with its rich tiles and pretty gabled roof.

'And it is twenty-five since I saw it,' said the Colonel quietly, 'when your Aunt Margetson, Mora, and your aunt that died and I used to come here blackberrying when we were children.'

'Then you belong to the Uraines of Brent!' cried Mr. Blake; 'how strange I never thought of that before.'

There seemed plenty of bedrooms in the old house, and to Mora it was like being conducted through a roofed-in paradise, to be led up the narrow oak stairs, through room after room till hers was reached—a most charming little bower, all beflounced and befrilled with snowy muslin, and with a lattice opening first on to a garden, and beyond that on to a stretch of field and waste land, and beyond these on to the sea.

What a meal it was too that had been prepared for the hungry travellers. 'I would not allow them a lunch basket even,' said Paul Blake with a twinkle; 'I knew you'd want to stuff them directly you got hold of them, mother.'

Fowls, such fowls! None of your skimpy, scrawney

creatures whose skin and bones are the only things that identify them with the poultry yard. Ham, too, and bread sauce, and a great dish of apple dumplings, and a bowl of rich scalded cream—a luxury Mora had never tasted before.

‘Devonshire cream is the only cream there is in England, isn’t it, mother?’ asked Paul, giving the Colonel a little kick under the table.

‘Yes, my dear,’ said his mother innocently; ‘they make what they call scalded cream both in Cornwall and Somersetshire, but it’s poor stuff,’ she said, shaking her head, ‘it’s poor stuff.’

There was tea and also cider on the table, but Mrs. Blake, senior, and the Colonel were the only ones who drank the latter.

Mora would have liked to do so as far as her personal tastes went, but for some time past love for Maggie Blake, and a loyal desire to aid Paul Blake in his unremitting efforts to guard his wife from the approach of temptation, had made her rigorously abstain from taking, even at home, the thing that Maggie must neither see, smell, nor taste.

After tea was over the four visitors went for a walk, and Mr. Blake managed to detach Mora from his wife, saying, ‘Colonel, you take Mrs. Blake home by the road, while I take Miss Mora up the hill a little way.’

‘I want to have a little talk with you,’ he said, as they stood resting against a stile after a rather steep climb; ‘I return to-morrow, and I may not get another chance.’

Below, stretching dimly into the dark bank of cloud on the horizon, was the soft hazy sea, and they could hear the rhythmic fall of the incoming tide on the shingle a mile away.

The sun had long since disappeared beneath the

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ruddy verge, and here and there a white star looked out of the darkening indigo sky.

There was not a sound besides the falling waves and an occasional twitter of birds in the thicket behind, and Mora felt a strange solemnity come over her, a deep wordless passion of something undefined.

Mr. Blake did not seem in a hurry to speak, and for a while he puffed at his cigar in silence.

'Seems as if we were in some vast cathedral, doesn't it?' he said, taking the cigar and knocking the end of it against the wooden rail. Then he cleared his throat and began: 'Miss Uraine,' he said slowly, 'you are beginning to have a purpose in your life; your late experience has taught you far more than you know. Now I want you to take my place in caring for my dear wife in my absence. My mother does not know all her history, nor do you as yet, but I'm going to tell it you now, because the knowledge will give you more power in acting promptly if you need to do so. But I don't want my mother to know, for fear she should confide it to Miss Lily Chitterling, whom you'll meet here most likely.'

Then Paul told her the whole pitiful tale from the beginning,—of how the drunken mother used to take the beautiful child to public-houses, and make the little creature stand on the counter and sing obscene songs, of which she was too young to know the meaning, and get drunk, and make the child drunk also, on the coppers that poured in, especially on Saturday nights. And how, most fortunately, the wretched mother died, and the little girl was adopted by a poor but sober neighbour with five children of her own.

Of how, at ten, she became a pantomime child, and at fourteen was claimed by her father, who remarked that she would be a good investment, and treated her

on the whole pretty well until the drink he forced her to take to make her acting more, well—Mr. Blake substituted a word for the one Dukelle had used—more lively, began to undermine a naturally brilliant brain and give him trouble; and of his brutality, culminating in the catastrophe on the stage.

'The rest you know,' said Mr. Blake, 'and I'm sorry to make you cry,' for the tears were pouring down her face as she looked up at him in the dim twilight.

'But my mother will want her to take cider, and those Chitterlings will think it an insult if she doesn't taste theirs. But you must stand firm, and not let her have it. And if the worst comes to the worst, you must wire for me to come down. You just say, "Come at once," and I'll come. She has improved wonderfully of late in every way, but Dr. Slaney says her heart is in a very weak state, and any excitement might be fatal. Will you do this for me?'

'Yes,' said Mora solemnly, 'I will.'

They did not keep late hours at the Home Farm, and by ten o'clock all was quiet and most of the household asleep.

But Mora was lying awake, with her hands folded against her chin, and was learning how to pray.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### MAGGIE'S VICTORY

FOR a while after the Colonel and Mr. Blake had gone back to London, all went very happily with the two girls.

Mrs. Blake was as motherly kind to her children, as she called them, as could be, while old Joe's devotion and enthusiasm knew no bounds. It was hard to say which of the pair afforded him the more gratification,—Maggie, with her helpless ignorance of all that pertained to farm life, or Mora, who possessed a fund of utterly unreliable and highly erroneous information about most things connected with it.

'They be a couple of purty dunderheads,' he said fondly, as he watched them learning to churn under the half-indulgent, half-scornful supervision of old Peggy, who had never quite forgiven 'Maister Paul' for having quitted the farm.

'I've never made anything out of a carroty poll yet at churning,' she confided to the old man, as she waited for the two in print gowns and large round-about aprons, who were crossing the yard to the dairy, 'and I never expect to; but that dark-haired one's sharp enough. She'll soon learn if she sticks to it.'

As usual, Maggie speedily became tired, and it was at

these times that the unselfishness of Mora's love showed itself in its true colours.

With that tremendous latent energy which long suppression seemed to have intensified rather than diminished, also her keen interest in this new world of knowledge and action, she would have remained at the churn till Peggy, or the next meal, brought her labours to an end. For a moment it seemed a hardship to have to leave off the delightful business just as she was getting into the spirit of it, and she was tempted to coax her friend to be patient a little longer. But the thought of how disastrous it was for Maggie to become mentally tired, and Mr. Blake's solemn trust in her, chased her momentary selfishness; so, thanking old Peggy for the lesson, she led her charge away to find some fresh interest for her in the search for eggs, or a cautious inspection of the cows over the gate that led to the meadow.

Before long she had to learn how well-grounded was Mr. Blake's fear that his mother might, if unchecked, prevail on his wife to enjoy the sweets of her home-brewed cider and perry.

'What! Never tasted cider, my dear?' the old lady exclaimed as she was showing off the big cellars one morning to her two guests.

Joe was with them, and with that native gallantry that distinguished him, he was holding Maggie's white dress by one of its folds, for fear it should get a soil from the damp floor.

'Run and get a glass, Joe!' cried his mistress, 'they must have some this very minute. Never tasted cider indeed! I never heard of such a thing.'

'No, no!' cried Mora in sudden alarm, 'please don't. We must not. Neither Maggie nor I may take anything of that kind.' And then for fear of

being closely pressed for a reason, she added, 'We are both under doctor's orders, you know'; and taking Maggie's hand she led her swiftly away.

'Well, I never! What nonsense! As if a little innocent cider could hurt any one!' cried Mrs. Blake, and for a few moments she was seriously huffed, for it was little short of criminal in her eyes to lightly esteem the Home Farm brew.

At that moment Miss Lily Chitterling stood in the doorway, and Mrs. Blake hailed her with a feeling of relief, for in her at any rate was an unfailing appreciator of the excellences of the local beverage.

'Do 'ee have a glass!' said her hostess. 'It's a long ride from the Priory.' For Miss Chitterling's habit and riding-whip explained clearly enough that she had ridden over from the Priory on horseback.

'I never say "No" to a good offer,' said the lady, smacking her lips and holding out her glass for more; 'and I don't think there's any such cider as yours in the whole county.'

Which well-merited tribute from an expert put the old lady into a good humour again, and enabled her to get over the affront put upon her by the slight Mora had unwittingly dealt the famous cider.

'I hear you have your son's wife staying with you at last,' said Miss Lily as they made their way into the front parlour, 'so I've come to see if you can come to tea at the Priory on Friday. There'll be a full moon, and Joe can drive you back in good time for bed. I know you like to get home early.'

'Her friend, Miss Uraine, is with her, you must invite her too,' said Mrs. Blake.

'Oh, certainly! But I hope she's not stuck-up like those other Uraines. Is she related to them? They're a high-and-mighty lot, and no mistake! We invited

them to Willie's wedding last year, and they declined with thanks ; so pa refused them the shooting over his ground this season.'

'No, she's not stuck-up,' replied Mrs. Blake. 'She's a nice girl, but has some peculiar notions. Oh, there they are !' and she pulled the curtain on one side for Miss Chitterling to see them coming.

'Which is Paul's wife ?' asked the visitor, and when Maggie was pointed out as being the one, she was silent.

'I used to think he was sweet on you,' remarked the old lady with the freedom of age and intimacy.

'He wasn't my style,' said Miss Lily with a shrug, and she was no doubt right. 'She looks rather soft,' she continued with a little snort.

'Well, perhaps she does, she has extremely delicate health,' replied Paul's mother. But she did not like to hear her son's choice spoken lightly of even by Miss Lily, so she continued deprecatingly, 'She had a terrible shock. There was a fire, and Paul had to rescue her out of the flames.'

'Dear me, how romantic ! Perhaps that has to do with the colour of her hair. Miss Uraine looks clever. But my ! she's a dowdy.'

By this time the two had reached the latch-gate ; and their hostess called them into the parlour, presenting the three to each other with much formality ; because, although Miss Chitterling was her friend and admired her cider, the Knoll was a much grander house inside and out than the Priory, and Mora's social position as the daughter of Colonel Uraine superior to that of Miss Chitterling, who had been nurtured as it were on a herbal draught, and who, though rich, had the humble juices of the pennyroyal and other wild 'yarbs' in her veins, instead of the blue blood of one

of the best families in the county. Also, Miss Lily was a yet unappropriated blessing of thirty-nine or thereabouts.

She was also gaunt and angular, and her upper lip dark with a somewhat pronounced moustache ; but she had a cheery good-hearted way with her, and so the two younger women did not dislike her at first, and accepted her invitation with the cordiality of those to whom an evening out to tea is not of very frequent occurrence.

While the girls stood watching her mount, she rattled on with all sorts of parting injunctions to Joe, not because she imagined for a moment that he needed them, but for the purpose of showing off before the two visitors.

'As if *äi* didn't know it arl avore she were born,' muttered the old man, who was not very much enamoured of 'that there lanky gawk,' as he called her.

'Do you play? Ah, then bring your music! We are all *very* musical,' she shouted to Mora, as she waved her whip in farewell.

'Do you think it is safe for Maggie to go out amongst strangers?' wrote Mora to Mr. Blake. 'To-day is Tuesday, and I can have your answer, or rather you had better send it to your mother, before Friday. I don't quite like Miss Chitterling's manners, and she has invited us to tea, and to meet some friends at the Priory. I want to do exactly as you wish in everything, but it is not easy to do it without advice.'

It was anything but easy ; for callers dropped in, and it was such a simple usual piece of hospitality to have the cider brought out, and for each caller to be heartily pressed to take some. Often enough Mora herself would hand it round, and Maggie had done so once or twice, until her friend impressed upon her

that she must not, as Paul would not be pleased if she did so.

'I wish he had told his mother why Maggie ought not even to see it,' sighed Mora one day after a rather close encounter with the old lady on Maggie's behalf. 'It is a mistake not to ; for though she gossips a great deal, she's very sensible, and too proud of him to go against him before strangers in such a thing as that.'

In fact her anxiety was becoming so keen that the charm of lovely scenery and the delicious wholesome life of the farm were hardly sufficient to keep her from longing to get back to Brombridge, and be rid of a responsibility that was almost greater than she could bear.

To be sure Maggie had improved wonderfully. She had entirely lost the wild, hunted-animal look. She was not so hesitating in her manner ; and the dazzling whiteness of her skin had taken on a faint sweet bloom like that of a wild rose.

She had even regained some of the lost notes in her once pretty song voice ; and Mora loved to hear her crooning to herself as she did up her hair in the early morning, or actually singing in a low and pathetic tone, as she wandered along the sand by the sea, where they so often went in the afternoon to gather seaweed and hunt for shells.

She did not often speak of her husband ; but, apparently, he was never out of her thoughts. For she would spend an hour in spelling out the word "Paul" in small pink shells on the beach ; and when they were sitting over their beadwork, of which occupation she was fonder than anything else, she would lay down her needle and arrange the beads on the table in a pattern that always contained the one dear word.

He had written her a little love-letter every day, and Mora guided her hand as one would a child's to answer him back again. Also the two had had their likenesses taken by the local photographer ; and poor as the picture was, it was a substantial proof that though Mora looked too thin and grave, Maggie had filled out, and was somewhat rounder than Paul had ever known her to be.

At last Friday afternoon came, and Mora, who had been crying in private at the non-appearance of a message from Mr. Blake, had to face the uncertainty of a pleasant or unpleasant evening at the Priory.

'I wonder if he is angry at my interference?' she mused as she followed Maggie out to the trap which the stable boy had brought round.

Old Joe had donned his best Sunday clothes for the grand occasion, and had crowned the glory of his large blue coat with the velvet collar with a ridiculous tall hat, that being too large for him had a trick of resting well down on his somewhat bushy eyebrows.

Mrs. Blake, senior, had put on her black satin gown and Honiton lace collar ; also a very large miniature of her dead husband, which hung as a pendant from a brown hair chain.

The two younger women wore their Sunday frocks —Mora's being the much-loathed gray, somewhat disguised by a white fichu unearthed from some long-discarded finery of Mrs. Blake's, the new black silk having been discarded by Maggie in set terms.

The drive was a three-mile one, and delightful ; for the hedges were in bud, and all the thickets rang with the love-songs of the birds.

When they arrived at the Priory they found Miss Lily gorgeous in red silk and black lace, and surrounded by one or two young men, who gave one the

idea that hair-oil was still used in those parts, also patchouli.

There was quite a number of people assembled in the big drawing-room, and Mora soon realised that she was a star of considerable magnitude, being a Uraine.

Old Mr. Chitterling was short and very fat, but boiling over with hospitality and good-humour; and though his jokes were rather strongly flavoured at times he meant well, and Mora got on better with him than with the young men.

She had, however, to be much on her guard with him, she found, as they marched or rather shambled arm-in-arm into tea; for he evidently knew very little of Mr. Blake's circumstances, and was eager to know more.

'Is he as rich as they say?' he said in a loud voice, regardless of the fact that young Mrs. Blake was close behind with his son.

'He is very well off,' said Mora.

'As well off as I am, for instance?' he continued.

'I don't know how well off you are,' retorted Mora, smiling painfully at him.

But old Mrs. Blake overheard, and she came smartly to the rescue.

'Now don't you go pumping Miss Uraine about our family matters, Mr. Chitterling! If you want to know, ask me, and I'll tell you what a princely place my son has.'

Before long Mora discovered that there was a standing feud between Mrs. Blake, senior, and Mr. Chitterling; also, that Miss Lily never lost an opportunity of assisting in the discomfiture of 'Pa,' as she called him; but, on the whole, the tea was a great success, and Mora felt as if she had never enjoyed anything so much in her life, except that never-to-be-

forgotten first dinner at the Knoll, after which she had been talked to by Mr. Blake in the library, and had seen him smile for the first time.

'Won't you play us something?' asked the young Mr. Chitterling, opening the piano, after they had returned to the drawing-room. But Mora said she would rather do so by and by; so the company played at various games with much zeal and enterprise.

'Let's have forfeits!' cried old Mr. Chitterling; 'there's no fun like 'em.'

'No, indeed!' retorted his daughter, sharply, 'not till you're out of the way, pa. You'd go kissing Miss Uraine and Mrs. Blake, and there 'ud be a fine to-do.'

'Maggie is getting tired, Mrs. Blake,' said Mora anxiously; 'don't you think we'd better go?'

'But supper'll be ready directly, my dear! They won't like us to go till after supper.'

'I should think not, indeed!' cried Miss Lily, who had been promoting her brother George's intention of making an impression on Miss Uraine; 'why, George is going to sing! I'll tell you what! Mrs. Blake, junior, shall lie down on the couch in the dining-room if she likes. She'll be all right there.'

'I must stay with her if she does, said Mora firmly, and foreseeing trouble.

'No, no, my dear, you mustn't. I'll take care of her,' said old Mrs. Blake; and she took Maggie by the arm and led her away, followed by Miss Lily, and a young man who acted as the useful person at a pinch.

'You must play it for me,' whispered Mr. George Chitterling, placing his song on the desk, and drawing out the stool for Mora.

With most unpleasant misgivings, Mora took her seat on the piano stool, and began to play the foolish

music of a harmless and feeble ditty, 'Come at eve and kiss me, mother.'

The singer had a good voice, but the most shadowy idea of how to use it; and he bawled so loudly that he almost deafened the unhappy pianist, over whose shoulder he was obliged to peer closely at the words of the song.

'You play splendidly,' he gasped, as he fanned himself with a piece of music, and mopped the back of his red neck. 'Now do play something while I take a rest, and then we'll have another song.'

'Oh, do !' shouted several voices.

"Weber's Last Waltz" will have to do for them,' thought Mora to herself, and the association of the piece with another place and scene caused her to make a face at the cross-stitch roses on the piano front.

She had hardly got through the first few bars, however, when she heard a sound that almost paralysed her for a moment, and made her start up from the stool, and, with blanching face and horror-stricken eyes, rush wildly out of the room.

She had heard Maggie's voice cry 'Paul ! Paul ! Paul !' and there was a sound of breaking glass.

'My darling ! my pet ! what is it ?' cried Mora, going up to the frightened girl, and laying hold of her wrist with one hand, and with the other arm encircling her waist.

'I want Paul,' whispered the poor thing, beginning to tremble violently. 'Tell Paul to come and take me home.'

'Paul shall come, dearest, but we must get home first. What is it ?' and she drew the girl down into a chair, and pressed the beautiful head against her bosom as she had seen Paul do.

'Go away !' she cried, waving her hand with an

imperious gesture to the people who crowded up the doorway to see what was the matter, and they went, somewhat startled in their turn at the manners of Miss Uraine.

'Mother dear,' she said, and her tension of nerve was such that she was not aware of the terms in which she was addressing Mrs. Blake, 'we must get her home as quickly as possible. Don't wait for anybody, but have the trap round at once.'

'Well, I never! What a temper!' said Miss Lily, crossly, when she had got back to the drawing-room. 'All that fuss and bother because I offered her ladyship a little weak brandy-and-water. It serves him right for having married such a fool; but Paul Blake must lead a pretty life of it. And that Uraine girl, too!'

'You wouldn't 'a done such a thing, would you?' jibed old Mr. Chitterling, rather unkindly. 'You'd 'a mopped it up and had some more.'

Maggie never uttered a word as they put her into the trap, and Mora had to do a brief leave-taking with as good a grace as she could, flaring up inwardly into sudden anger at Mr. George's parting words:—

'What a shame for all your fun to be spoilt by that red-headed wife of Blake's. I wanted you to play for me again.'

As for old Mrs. Blake, she was so shaken that she forgot to say something cutting to her old enemy, as he stood in the porch watching them go.

Once at home Maggie was put to bed as quickly as possible, and hot bottles laid to her ice-cold feet.

'I'm sure she ought to have some brandy,' said the old lady reproachfully. 'Our doctor would order some at once.'

'No,' said Mora firmly. 'I have given her a dose of what Mr. Blake always gives her when she has a

turn of this sort. Did she have anything at the Chitterlings'?"

'Well, she didn't taste it. She dashed the glass out of Lily's hand. I told her it was no use to try and make her take it. She held the glass up to her lips, but I don't think any went in. I don't know what Lily will think of you both.'

'Oh, I don't care a bit what she or any one else thinks,' replied Mora, with a groan. 'I only pray that Maggie may get back to the Knoll safely.'

Once again Mrs. Blake protested rather feebly, for she found that Mora was hard to manage, and that was when the latter signified her intention of sitting up all night. However, she gave orders for the necessary arrangements for her so doing, and murmured to herself as she retired, 'I wish they hadn't come. I like people who don't want such a fuss made. Paul ought to have stayed to look after his wife himself.' But she was not altogether happy about her share in the business, and it was some time before she slept for thinking how different Maggie and Mora were from that sensible, healthy Lily Chitterling.

The promised Brombridge Temperance Demonstration had come off, and whether because of its novelty, or because there was a sincere desire among the better townsfolk to welcome anything that promised to lift up the social life of the place, or both combined, it was an unprecedented success.

For four nights Ebenezer had been barely able to accommodate the eager crowd that had flocked in nearly an hour beforehand; and the chair had been successively taken by such leading local lights as the Mayor, the vicar, the Congregational minister, and the Colonel of the Royal Brombridge Rangers.

As for the Teetotal Warriors, from having been an unpopular and feeble body, they suddenly swelled into quite a large army; and with their huge blue rosettes, and beaming faces, they filled up the organ gallery, or acted as stewards to show the people into their places, and take pledges.

But on the fifth and last evening the crowd was so great after the place was packed, that the Mayor had the Town Hall opened for the overflow, and took an extra glass by way of drinking health and prosperity to the movement.

This was also the night on which Mr. Blake had consented to take the chair, and excitement at the thought of a music-hall manager presiding at a temperance meeting was at its height.

'Such a thing has never been done before,' said the oldest teetotaler, who, at eighty-five, had walked ten miles in, and would walk ten miles out after the meeting.

Dean Gorsetown and the Rev. Robert Paine were the two principal speakers, so it was arranged that while the one spoke at Ebenezer, the other should speak at the Town Hall, and *vice versa*.

Mr. Blake made an excellent chairman. He had a charming voice and delivery; and when he finished a short emphatic speech on the need for improvement in the town, with these words: 'I can assure you there will be no drink licence applied for, either for Sellcuts' or the hotel in connection with it,' the cheering was immense, and it was some little time before it subsided sufficiently for him to make the next announcement.

He had to leave before the meeting was over, as he had to catch a train for London, he said. As he passed down the quiet passage by the side of the chapel

to his carriage, he heard a voice, which he knew to be that of Mr. Bleby, saying—

‘Capital advertisement, eh, Mr. Cox? You and I ‘ud like to puff our businesses that way, wouldn’t we? And to see that fellow Paine kowtowing to a person like Blake! Well, thank goodness, they’ve had no countenance from me. I don’t give a fig for such teetotalism; no, nor such religion either!’

Mr. Blake only smiled to himself. ‘That’s Bleby all over,’ he said.

The train for Bickerton left Paddington at midnight, but Mr. Blake managed to catch it, and as he settled himself comfortably amid the hired white pillows, and pulled his fur rug round him, he thought of Mora’s belated letter, and murmured before dropping off to sleep, ‘I wonder how it came to be so delayed?’

Meanwhile Mora had spent a strange night, for Maggie had slept so very movelessly, that she had stooped over her many times to make sure she was breathing.

Peggy had placed a little spirit stove with all the necessary appurtenances for making tea on the broad window seat, and at three o’clock Mora felt so empty and forlorn that she set to work to brew some as noiselessly as possible.

She, however, managed to drop a lump of sugar, and Maggie awoke.

‘Have some tea, darling?’ said Mora, bending over her.

‘I dreamt Paul was here,’ whispered Maggie, looking round.

‘He will come soon,’ said Mora, handing her a steaming cup, and settling the pillow at her back, little guessing how true the words were. ‘I’m going to send him a telegram as soon as ever the post-office is open, telling him to come at once.’

'Oh, I am so glad,' said Maggie, 'I want to go home. I want to be with Paul. I shall die if he stays away. I only want you and him.' Then she gave back the cup, kissed Mora's hand, and turned over and was soon asleep again.

By and by the objects in the little room grew more and more distinct, and the noises of the farm-yard indicated that the night was past.

Very slowly, for she was tired, stiff, and cold after her night's vigil, Mora went to the window and looked out on the brightening landscape. She could see the sea-gulls trotting about in the field, and flying over the sea, and now and then she heard their voices calling from the low cliffs.

Then she watched a narrow rim of gold as it appeared above a heath-covered slope, widening and widening till the long streak caught the waves, and seemed to set the sea afame.

How long she stood there she did not know, but the sound of a railway whistle, continuous and piercing, recalled her to the fact that life inside the house was astir, and that Peggy was calling to the stable-boy across the yard.

Going to the washstand she dipped the corner of a towel into the fresh cold water, and revived her weary face with it, then, considerably refreshed, she moved noiselessly round to the window that looked along the garden path, down the steep and winding road that led to the station.

She had been gazing on the dewy grass and moist rosebushes for a few minutes when the latch of the gate clicked, and Paul Blake walked up the path.

In another moment she was downstairs, and in the parlour, and before she had time to think was in his arms.

'My dear,' he said hoarsely, 'is she all right?'

'Yes,' replied Mora, sobbing, 'but oh, I'm so glad you've come,' and she held his hand as though afraid to let it go. 'She stood out so bravely, and smashed the glass rather than take it. But it frightened her, and she cried out for you. I haven't left her all night till this moment.'

'You have not even taken your things off,' he said with deep feeling, 'how good you are! Thank God you were with her! Now go to bed at once. I'll take your place.'

Mora did as he told her with a peace of heart such as she had never felt before.

Thus it was that when about half-past seven Maggie opened her eyes, it was with a happy little cry, 'I dreamt you were here.'

'So I am,' he said. 'I've come to take you home.'

'Are you surprised to see me?' Paul asked as he joined his mother at her punctual eight o'clock breakfast.

'I've given up being surprised at anything you do, long ago,' she replied, 'and I'm only too glad to see you. But the Chitterlings will never forgive your wife and Miss Uraine.'

'They needn't,' he retorted. 'They are a vulgar lot. There's no love lost. We shall return on Monday, and the lovely Lily will never be such a fool as to fall out with you.'

On Sunday all the Home Farm party went to church, and it is to be feared that old Mrs. Blake felt such a sense of exultation over her neighbours as her distinguished-looking son and his wife and Miss Uraine, whose hat and muff atoned for the worthlessness of her dress, passed up the aisle, that she forgot to

single out Miss Chitterling for the accustomed nod of greeting.

As for old Mr. Chitterling, he was so perturbed by the sight of so much beauty, that he made some of the responses in the wrong place, and upset the equilibrium of his daughter at the end of the 'Te Deum,' causing her to pinch him with some severity, by singing 'let me never be confounded' in a voice so stentorian as to completely drown that of the curate.

The feeble and infirm vicar preached a long and dreary sermon on the words 'Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.'

While he was giving out the text, Mora looked quickly across the old square pew at Mr. Blake, and their eyes met.

'How they waste their opportunities,' said the latter as they sauntered home, Maggie on one arm and Mora on the other, old Mrs. Blake lingering behind to speak to Miss Lily; 'we could have given him a few points for a much livelier sermon on such a text as that.'

'Yes,' replied Mora, for the text had sent her memory back over four very impressive nights in her life,—the night of the fire; that of her leaving home; of lying awake and repenting in the hospital ward; and the last night.

Meanwhile a letter from Mr. Blake to Mrs. Uraine was speeding through the post, and within it the former had slipped a prepaid telegram form to ensure a certain and speedy reply. But he had kept his own counsel, for even he was not quite sure how far he had succeeded in managing Mora's mother.

'I think,' so he had written to Mrs. Uraine, 'that it will be easier for you and Miss Mora to meet in our drawing-room after what has taken place. So will you consent to her returning home with us, and being our

guest for a day or two ; and will you and the Colonel favour us with your company at dinner on Tuesday evening at seven ? I have no wish but to help you both over a rather embarrassing meeting. Miss Mora's great kindness to my dear wife justifies me in what might otherwise seem as interference, and sometimes an outsider can render a little service of this kind more easily than a member of the family can.'

For a long time Mrs. Uraine held the letter in her hand and mused over its proposals in silence ; they were so astounding in the light of her past attitude to the Knoll and its inmates, and yet so natural as coming from Mr. Blake. At last she spoke out loud, forgetting that the Colonel was reading his *Field News* in the arm-chair by the window—

' I have never met a man like him,' she said, ' he's so thoughtful and straightforward. If only he were a Christian, and not connected with the stage ! He writes such a gentlemanly letter.'

' Who's that, my dear ? ' asked her husband, diplomatically.

' Oh, it's Mr. Blake, Henry. Bickerton doesn't suit his wife, and he's bringing her and Mora home to-morrow, and he wants Mora to stay a day or two at the Knoll, and invites you and me to dine with them the next day.'

' And shall you accept ? ' asked the Colonel warily. For he knew that if he appeared too sure of her acquiescence, she would be likely to retreat into hostility.

' Well, I think there is reason in what he says,' remarked Mrs. Uraine, folding up the letter and putting it into her pocket, ' and that is that it will make it less embarrassing for Mora under the circumstances.'

' Very considerate of him,' murmured the Colonel

behind his paper, and smiling silently at the masterful management of Paul Blake.

'Of course it is a little soon for her to be coming home before the town has done gossiping about her illness and absence,' continued Mora's mother, 'but I shall be glad to see the poor child again, and now that Ted is so taken up with Mr. Ross, it is rather a good thing that she should have a companion so near at hand. That young Mrs. Blake seems quite a gentle and ladylike creature.'

So the Colonel went off with a light heart, and thanked Heaven, being a large-minded man, that what he hadn't been able to do in the long years in which he had had the opportunity, another man had accomplished in a few months.

'To think of his managing her as neatly as that!' he remarked to Ted, who had invited his careful inspection of one fair but unmistakable hair on his upper lip.

'You are going to stay a day or two with us,' said Mr. Blake to Mora after they had waved their last farewells to old Mrs. Blake, and Peggy, and Joe. 'I've written to cook to have the lilac room put ready for you.'

'Oh, Mr. Blake! Oh, Maggie!' cried Mora, her face suffusing with a rapture that did away with all its pallor, and gave a charming softness to her eyes, and it was significant also that she did not think it necessary to ask as of old, 'But do you think mother will let me?'

'Your mother has written quite a kind telegram,' said the manager, 'and she and your father are going to dine with us on Wednesday.'

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

THE hoardings had long been up round the ruins of 'Sellcuts', but for the past few days there had been hammering early and late over the erection of fresh ones, that extended all along the street in front of the Green Grapes, as far as the bank, and it was rumoured that with the exception of the latter, the houses and buildings were going to be pulled down, to make way for Mr. Blake's new theatre, and some other projected institutions that were to change the whole character of the town.

'It'll bring another judgment on Brombridge,' said Mrs. Cox tearfully, while testifying at a somewhat scanty assembly of the Narrow Way Pilgrims. 'It's going to be grander far than the old one, more alluring to souls. As for the talk of its clearing away the houses in the Cut, that might have been done by the police long ago. I've no faith in Satan casting out Satan. That Mr. Blake's working for his own ends, you may be sure. There'll be another fire and another judgment. Oh, I hope as there'll be a flood, or an earthquake, or something to put a stop to all this wickedness!'

Pilgrim Blodger followed suit, but it was noticed that he was not quite so fervent as usual in his denun-

ciation of the projected building ; and that he concluded his rather mild depreciation of it, by reminding his fellow-pilgrims that whatever iniquity might be connected with the new scheme, nothing could be worse than the state of things in the past.

'We must remember,' he said, facing Sister Cox as he said so, 'that the man who is leasing Sellcuts' estate for all his new building, is the man who tried to get the Mayor, Corporation, and Police to shut off the Cut, and they wouldn't or couldn't do it. Maybe the Lord is using him as an instrument to work out His own righteous purposes after all. We've been praying and asking the Lord to do it this long while, and perhaps He's answering our prayers by sending a theatre man to do it for Him. So that what the Churches, nor the Town Council, nor the Police haven't done, *he's* going to do, and it's the Lord's doing, and it's marvellous in our eyes' ; and Pilgrim Blodger groaned as he sat down, but it was partly because Mr. Bleby had risen to his feet—it was near dinner-time, and Mrs. Blodger's temper had not yet improved.

'Sister Cox was saying,' said Mr. Bleby, 'that she hoped there'd be a flood, or an earthquake, to put an end to all this wickedness ; and so there will be at the end of this dispensation' ; and his eye glittered with a wild light as he proceeded with much length and many quotations to expatiate on the 'time, and times, and half a time,' that was to be the limit of God's patience with a rascally world, whose badness would finally detach it from the last remaining strand of divine mercy, and let it drop into endless perdition.

Where the comfort or stimulus to better life came in in this kind of teaching, it would be hard to say ; and in Mr. Bleby's case it was evident that he was not improving, but deteriorating fast from what he had been

in the days when he was a conscientious, if cantankerous deacon of Ebenezer.

He had always been sharp and somewhat vicious of tongue, but had maintained a reputation for being pretty reliable in his statements ; and those who most resented his rancour would often go to him for information, and make the best of his harsh judgments. But since his desertion of Ebenezer he seemed to have been going down-hill ; and the Narrow Way Pilgrims were not so proud of their acquisition, nor so subservient to his dictatorship, as at first. Also his refusal to take any part in the temperance demonstration had rather told against him ; even the beer-logged tanner having been heard to remark in the bar of the Goat and Fold, that if *he'd* made such a profession of being a teetotaler, he wouldn't have 'given 'em the cold shoulder same as Bleby done.'

When Mr. Bleby passed from glib condemnation of the universe, and all it contained, to the personal dooming by name of Mr. Paine, Mr. Blake, the Mayor, and some others, of whose souls he evidently held a very poor opinion, Mr. Blodger could stand it no longer, and rose to go with a look of such determination on his face that Mrs. Cox's curiosity was roused, and she followed him out.

'He won't do himself nor us any good with such loose talk as that,' he said moodily ; 'and I'm not going to stand by and hear it. We'll be had up for libel if he's not stopped somehow.'

'It seems to me he's going a bit too far,' she replied uneasily. 'He's kept Cox away these last three times ; but Cox always was kind o' timid. If he'd only keep to burning the whole world of sinners, it 'ud be all right ; but when he comes to naming those he'd like to see in the flames, it's going too far,' and she nodded

her head with the air of one who has uttered words of wisdom,—‘it’s going too far.’

By this time the two had emerged from the entrance of the iron building, and were facing the big advertisements on Sellcuts’ hoardings.

‘One of them’s a picture of the swimming-baths that’s going to be,’ said Mr. Blodger pacificatorily.

‘For washing the dirt of the music hall off them,’ sniffed Mrs. Cox.

‘And another a gymnasium,’ he went on, without noticing her interruption.

‘Bodily exercise profiteth little,’ said the rotund lady, ‘and no good’ll come of it that I can see.’

‘It’ll make a lot of business in the town,’ pleaded the other pilgrim, whose persistence began to force itself on Sister Cox’s dull intellect.

‘You’re wanting to say something ; whatever is it, Brother Blodger ?’

‘The fact is I’m not satisfied with Brother Bleby,’ he answered ; ‘I’m going back to Ebenezer,’ and he turned swiftly down the little lane that led to his shop and bakery.

That afternoon Mr. Paine and his little son Conrad were returning from a somewhat long walk out into the country, where they had been to visit a bed-ridden member of Ebenezer, who had been among the warmest to welcome the minister a year ago. He had, alas ! met with an accident at the mill, and was making a slow and painful recovery ; but his Sunday afternoons were cheered and enlivened by a visit from the pastor or one of his household.

Conrad had, as usual, been plying his father with long strings of theological and other conundrums, and they were standing still to take breath on the road close to the cemetery.

'Father, why is it that, when it's nice and warm, God lets the trees wear plenty of pretty green clothes; and, when it's cold and snowy, He takes all their clothes away, and they've to stand up naked in all the frost with nothing on, poor things?'

While his father was framing a suitable reply, he saw the lumbering form of Mr. Blodger turn out of the gate, and accordingly saluted him with a cordial 'Good afternoon.'

'I wanted a word with you,' said the pilgrim nervously, and they walked along side by side, the minister waiting for the other to speak.

'I left Ebenezer a year before you came,' said the latter at last; 'things had gone to sleep there; the town was getting worse and worse; and the Narrow Way Pilgrims seemed to have the true light, though my wife she's always been against them, not holding with an iron building for worship. But I've been kind of drawn to you,—yes I have,' said the pilgrim, gathering courage as he talked, "'specially since you've took up the temperance work same as you've done; and I want to come back to Ebenezer. Bleby's doing a lot of harm in our place, and I don't get no kind of comfort out of it, now he's there.'

'We shall be very pleased to have you among us again,' said Mr. Paine warmly, as he stopped and held out his hand; 'you know what to expect of me. I shan't ever preach exactly as you would like about everlasting torment, and the eternal failure of goodness; but I believe we are both aiming at the same thing, and there's unfailing comfort in the brotherhood of Jesus Christ.'

'Yes, that's it!' cried Mr. Blodger, brightening up; 'I get tired of all this talk of flames and burning. Since I saw Sellcuts' on fire, and thought of poor

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Williams getting burned in trying to save that girl, and Mr. Blake risking his life to snatch his young wife from the flames, I've somehow felt a bit troubled as to whether God wouldn't do for loving-kindness what the fireman did for duty, and the husband did for love. He's a good man, is Mr. Blake,' he continued; 'and I'm sorry when I think how I was down on him at the inquest. I've been thinking over it a deal since, and I'd rather trust myself in the company of him and you at the Last Day than with Bleby.'

So when they had returned home, and Conrad plied his father with the yet unsolved riddle of the trees, the latter replied cheerfully enough—

'Oh, you needn't pity the trees in winter, my boy. They are so much stronger for having the wind blow them well about, and clean all the fungus off them. They would become limp and weak if they always had millions of leaves to carry, and never any rest. God knows what's best for both trees and men.'

On the following day, when Mrs. Cox heard the news of Mr. Blodger's formal retirement from the Narrow Way Pilgrimage, she was very angry; and in the evening donned the stern majesty of her Sunday bonnet, and went round to argue with him, and bring him back to the fold.

Now, Mrs. Blodger was so pleased with her spouse for having thrown over the iron building, as she called it, that, being in a good humour, she had volunteered her services behind the counter, while he took a quiet nap in the little parlour at the back of the shop; consequently she was on hand to tackle Sister Cox, to his great relief, and this is what he heard—

'Is your husband in?'

'He's in; but I'm taking his place. What d'you want?'

'I want to see him for a few minutes.'

'Well, as I said before, I'm taking his place. What d'you want to see him for?'

'I want to know if it's true he's going back to Ebenezer.'

'Yes, it's quite true. He ought never to have left it.'

'That's as may be,' retorted Mrs. Cox, her spirit rising up in wrath against the sallow-faced little woman behind the counter. 'I want to know why he's leaving us, that's all.'

'Because he ought never to have belonged to you, that's why'; and Mrs. Blodger gazed at her visitor with a stony eye, as she clutched a flabby bun and an ancient jam tart from a tray under the counter, and gave them to a small client demanding 'a ha'porth of stale.'

'Who's been leading him on to this?' continued Mrs. Cox, whose feet were beginning to ache, and there was no chair on which to rest.

'The Pilgrims has.'

'Has Mr. Blake anything to do with it?' cried Mrs. Cox, getting fairly exasperated. 'I know he and Mr. Paine are friendly.'

'You'd better ask him,' was the reply; and Mrs. Blodger, whose beady black eyes were brimming over with enjoyment, began weighing out some flour, to her visitor's further discomfort.

'You might give me a reason,' plaintively continued the other, climbing down; 'Pilgrim Blodger and me have been leaders for close on a year, an' I don't think he ought to cut it without explaining why he's done so.'

'He's going to let you have a turn with Mr. Bleby,' replied Mrs. Blodger, pouring the contents of the scale

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into a bag ; ' *he* hasn't a wife and family, and 'twon't matter if *he*'s late for dinner on Sunday.'

' Mrs. Blodger,' said the other, gathering her mantle closer round her, previous to taking her departure, ' are you a converted woman ? '

' No, I'm not ! And I don't want to be—at least not *your* sort. Good evening, Mrs. Cox.'

' There,' she said, rubbing her hands in her apron and watching the bulky person of her foe across the lane, ' *she* hasn't got much change out of me ! Blodger is well out of it. I'll put in a sweet roll for Mrs. Paine's boys in the morning.'

By and by her husband came into the shop, and his manner to his hard-working, if worldly-wise, wife was more deferential than it had been for a long time ; and from that evening her temper began to mellow, and she refrained from the fierce nagging that had so interfered with her husband's peace of mind. She also accompanied him once a Sunday to Ebenezer, and confessed that she liked Mr. Paine's sermons, there was some sense in them.

It was nearly a month after Mr. Blodger's desertion of the Narrow Way Pilgrims, when one morning towards the end of May, the sound of tolling came slowly and solemnly over the town in the quiet of the hour before toil begins.

' Robert, do you hear that ? ' cried Mrs. Paine, who had opened the window to let in the fresh early breeze.

Boom ! boom ! it sounded, swaying to and fro across the chimneys and roofs ; and most of those who heard it knew it was the death-knell being rung from the tower of St. Columba.

' Does Dr. Slaney know who it is ? ' asked an eager voice at the surgery door.

'Yes, sir, I think he does, most likely. He was sent for to the Knoll about midnight,' said the woman who was shaking the mat at the door, 'and he has been there ever since.'

Alas! it was too true; for, a little past twelve, Mr. Blake's carriage had come with an urgent request that the doctor would return without a moment's delay and bring restoratives with him.

When he entered the bedroom he found the windows wide open, and Mrs. Blake lying on the couch with her night-clothing thrown back to give more air, while Mora and Mr. Blake, almost as pale as the white face on the pillow, were wringing out hot fomentations, and placing them with trembling touch on the fluttering heart, or wrapping them round the lifeless hands and feet.

After an hour or two, in which Dr. Slaney had tried the effect of electricity, she had apparently revived, and asked for some tea. Then she had pulled her husband's hand to her lips, and murmured something about leaving him, and had dozed again in that strange, motionless way that Mora had witnessed through the night at Bickerton.

So the three watched in the terrible silence, when the soft chime of the clock on the stairs seemed almost too loud to be borne, none of them moving from their various positions lest even the faintest of noises might disturb and frighten the sleeper, whose life was passing with the passing of the night.

About four or so the birds began to sing with so much vigour that Mora looked across to Dr. Slaney to shut the window, and at that moment the first sunlight glimmered upon the beautiful red-gold hair with sudden glory.

Soon after, Maggie opened her eyes and gazed

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at her husband with a strange moveless look of wonder.

‘What is it, my dearest?’ he said.

But she made no answer, gave a tiny sigh, and seemed to go to sleep again.

‘It’s all over, my dear girl,’ whispered the doctor.  
‘Come.’

When it became known through the medium of the postman and milkman that the master of the Knoll stood alone and desolate in the dumb agony of the grief that had fallen upon him, there arose on all sides a passion of tears and sympathy that did credit to the good feeling of Brombridge.

Indeed the early business of domestic and shop life was almost suspended for two or three hours, under the weight of the bereavement of Sellcuts’ manager.

Among the first to receive the dreadful tidings were Colonel and Mrs. Uraine; and they came so quickly as almost to follow the groom back to the Knoll.

To the honour of Mora’s mother be it said that she acted with the most surprising tenderness and delicacy; and when Dr. Slaney suggested his returning to his surgery to send for a woman whose calling was that of layer-out of the dead, she said at once, ‘Oh no, don’t let stranger’s hands touch the dear child. Her maid and I will do what is requisite.’

Furthermore, it showed the common sense and wisdom that are born of sympathy, that when Mora, with her eyes blinded with tears, insisted on taking her part in the last sad ministrations, her mother did not mention that it was highly improper, but let her do so, merely hoping that it would not get about.

Mr. and Mrs. Paine came just at the finish of the sacred task, and in that supreme moment of weeping

with those whose weeping was so tender Mrs. Uraine forgot all about her views on Dissent, and she and the Baptist minister's wife took on them the pitiful hospitalities necessitated by the blow that had fallen on the head of the house.

'Don't let me have time to think yet!' cried Mora. 'Let me be doing something! But go to him some of you! He is alone. Make him have something to eat. He will die if he isn't comforted.'

So Colonel Uraine made his way to the morning-room, and found the door locked.

'Let me in, my dear fellow,' he said.

The door was slowly opened by the master of the Knoll, and quickly locked again.

'I can't face them yet. I'm putting my poor girl's things away.'

'Let Mora help do so; think how she has loved her,' said the Colonel huskily.

The flowers had been put into the cold little hands, and Mora had kissed the still face, when her father whispered in her ear, 'He is putting her things away; go and help him, he looks knocked over.'

Mr. Blake was standing in the bay, with a leathern case in his hand. It was the photograph taken at Bickerton. Mora looked over his shoulder at it in silence till her sob seemed to recall him, and, looking at her with his eyes full of tears that did not fall, he said—

'There wasn't anything we could have done to have made her happier or stronger, was there?'

'No,' sobbed Mora, 'we made her as happy as ever we could.' And she hid her swollen and tear-stained face in her handkerchief lest it should add to his grief to witness another's.

'I cannot thank you for all you have done and suffered for her,' he went on. 'It's made all the differ-

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ence in her life'—and then he broke down, and, sinking into a chair, buried his face in the hands that rested on the table, and burst out into one pitiful cry of anguish that had been gathering all through the hours of a watch that he had known full well could only end in one way.

'Oh, my darling! To think it has ended so! To think that it has all been in vain, and that my love has failed. And you could not stay with me.'

It was another lesson in sorrow to Mora, that it is harder to see a grief that you cannot comfort than to bear your own, and the bowed man at the table did not, and could not, have measured the pain of her who stood so silently beside him.

Then Mora remembered that there was some coffee in the dining-room, and she left the room noiselessly, locking the door behind her, and taking the key.

On her return she found him still sitting where she had left him; but she made him drink the coffee.

'Let father stay with you now that I have to go home,' she whispered, as he bowed his head on his hands and made no sound.

After a while he rose up, saying—

'Yes, of course you must go home now that she has gone. Tell your father I would rather have him stay than any one else.'

So Mora's first home-coming after her rash and impulsive running away from it, was hand-in-hand with her mother, bitterly weeping, with the chill of the valley of the shadow on her life; and a feeling as if the end of all things had come in the passing away of the friend through whom she had learnt so much, in the few months of their close friendship.

'There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will.'

## CHAPTER XX

### A LONG FAREWELL

IT was an hour before the funeral, and Mora was altering the position of the buttons on a new black jacket which had just come from the tailor's.

'Oh, I'm so glad I'm going,' she was thinking. 'It would be such a cold thing to let only men stand round her when she is laid in her last bed. I hope it won't make mother ill.'

For Mrs. Uraine had once more risen to the occasion, and finding her daughter resolute about going to the burial, had resolved on accompanying her, so that the proprieties might not be unduly outraged.

In Brombridge it was not considered quite the thing for ladies to be seen at funerals; in fact, it was regarded as the dividing line between women and ladies, that in times of grief and burial the former sought no seclusion from ordinary daily life and publicity, and the latter were obliged to maintain it for rigidly appointed periods varying from a month to a year, according to the nearness or distance of relationship with the deceased.

Consequently when Mora broached the subject of her mourning attire as being necessary for the funeral, her mother had exclaimed—

'*You* go to the funeral? Oh no, my dear. That

would not be at all the correct thing to do ! It is never done by gentlewomen.'

'I mean to go, mother,' said Mora, raising her sad eyes to her mother, 'even if I walk by myself to the cemetery, and meet them at the grave.'

'Well, I don't know what people will think of you,' said Mrs. Uraine somewhat coldly ; 'well-ordered grief is one thing, but extravagant sorrow is another. Only men ought to be seen at funerals.'

'Oh, what do I care for what any one thinks !' cried Mora, bursting into tears, 'when Maggie only wants me to do one thing more for her, and when it's done, there'll never be anything else to do !'

One lesson Mrs. Uraine had learnt of late was, that it was less dangerous to let Mora do as she wanted than to try to prevent her.

So she left the room saying : 'I will go and speak to your father about it.'

'Better let her go,' said the Colonel, who also had a strong conviction that it was safer to give Mora her head than hold her in too tightly.

'If that is your decision, I shall have to go too, Henry,' said Mrs. Uraine. 'It would be most improper for Mora to be the only lady present.'

'She won't be, my dear,' replied the Colonel, 'some of the nurses of the hospital where the Blakes were married are coming, and some of the Camelot Theatre Company. But do come, it will seem much more fitting that you should be there. Mrs. Paine, and one or two Brombridge ladies are coming.'

'It will be a very mixed lot,' said Mrs. Uraine calmly ; 'I hope those theatre people will behave themselves. Of course I must go to protect Mora ; that settles it.'

From which it will be seen that though Mrs. Uraine

was waking up wonderfully, she was not quite clear enough to see things as they are, and was still, as it were, setting her watch by local time, instead of Greenwich, which is set by the sun.

*'I'm* going with you to poor dear Mrs. Blake's funeral,' said Mrs. Uraine to her daughter. So Mora knew that her mother had been managed at last by her husband the Colonel.

While Mora was adjusting the aforesaid buttons she heard the sound of wheels grating on the drive, and, looking out, saw that a cab had driven up to the porch—one of the station cabs.

'I wonder who it is?' she murmured.

'Mother little thought what she was buying me this black silk for,' she continued, as she put on the once scouted piece of attire—' how Maggie disliked it !'—and at the thought of the time at Bickerton, and that disastrous evening at the Chitterlings, her tears flowed afresh, and for a few moments she was utterly overcome.

She was recalled to herself again by her father's voice saying, as he knocked at the door, 'Come, my dear, it is time to go across.'

Silently Mora and the Colonel passed to the Knoll by the back way.

'Your cousin Harry has come down for the funeral, and he has taken your mother round by the front,' said the Colonel. 'But I thought you'd rather come the old way.'

'Harry come down !' cried Mora, and something of resentment shot through her mind at the thought of his presence at such a time.

'He will expect me to entertain him, and I want to be alone,' was her silent comment.

The carriages were all in waiting in the drive, and as Mora passed along the corridor from the smoking-

room to the hall she saw the bearers carrying out the oak coffin with all the wreaths on it, and, turning deadly cold, retreated into the morning-room to pull herself together.

Paul was there, and she had not seen him since she had left him with his head on his hands on that morning of Maggie's last going to sleep.

He took her hand in silence, and she suddenly resolved to be very strong and self-controlled for his sake, and they went out to join the others.

In silence Mr. Blake gave his arm to Mrs. Uraine, Mora and her father following them into the first carriage, which immediately rolled away after the open car in front which bore the wealth of flowers, and what lay beneath them.

When the service in the cemetery chapel was over, and the procession was standing by the grave, Mora found that her cousin had placed himself by her, and that Ted was on her other side. Her veil was a thick black gauze one, worn with the hat the Blakes had given her, and she could not see very plainly through it ; but she knew that Dr. Slaney was standing on one side of Mr. Blake, and her father on the other ; and she also knew that Mr. Carmichael's voice sounded very far away, and that the whole thing seemed like a scene in a dark and troubled dream, from which there must soon come an awakening.

They all returned from the grave in the order in which they had gone to it, and the only time Mr. Blake's voice broke the silence was just as they reached the porch, when he said to Mrs. Uraine—

‘ Will you please let Miss Uraine come in to-morrow at ten, there are a few little things I want her to take charge of belonging to my poor wife, while I am away. You'll bring her in, won't you ? ’ he said to the Colonel.

Dinner at Brombridge Hall was a very silent meal, for Mora had locked herself into the turret-room, and begged to be excused ; and Harry Margetson was, to say the least of it, not genial, for Mora had only shaken hands with him and rushed away.

Mrs. Uraine and Mr. Ross kept up a spasmodic conversation under difficulties, and Ted was mute and preoccupied.

Meanwhile Colonel Uraine and Mrs. Paine were doing their best to look after the twelve guests who had come down from London, and were going back by the four o'clock train.

Mr. and Mrs. Charles Simpson, the two Mackays, and Dickie Carter, had come to represent the Camelot ; three leading officials in the Conway Building Works ; and four pretty Sisters from the Mercy Hospital had also come to testify by their presence the sympathy and respect felt for the man whose young wife had died less than eighteen months after the romantic wedding in the hospital chapel.

Naturally Mrs. Paine and Mrs. Simpson made friends ; and when, lunch being over, the Colonel was deputed to say the last words of respectful and sympathetic farewell to Mr. Blake on behalf of his departing guests, they elected to spend a quiet hour at the parsonage, instead of going for a walk with the rest.

Mr. Paine had undertaken to escort the Sisters and the Mackays to see the ruins beyond the gaol, and the three officials hurried away to inspect the progress that had been made in pulling down the buildings on the site of the new scheme.

Dickie Carter preferred going off on his own hook, he said.

'There's not another man like him,' said Jane Elizabeth later on, as she sat nursing Mrs. Paine's baby

girl, and resting her feet on the fender in the cosy study. 'He's like two men rolled into one. He does the most unselfish and generous things you can imagine; and yet I've known him be as hard and close-fisted in others.'

'I do so want to know how he made his money, and where he gets it from,' sighed Mrs. Paine; 'it makes me so uncomfortable when he gives it me, to think it may have been got by the ruin of girls on the stage, or other ways as bad.'

'Well, you may make your mind easy,' said her visitor briskly. 'His father gave him a good education, and the rest he's done himself. He had one year of very hard struggle in London when he left the farm in Devonshire, and then he got taken on at the Conway Works. They were in low water at the time, but you've no idea how quickly he picked them up. Everything he does succeeds. He went from being foreman into partnership. He's built several theatres. The Camelot, which my husband manages, is one. You may always know Mr. Blake's theatres—the dressing-rooms are decent, the women's quite separate from the men's, and it's not so draughty behind the scenes. Then he took to acting, and you never heard any one act Romeo as he did. But the life didn't suit him, so he took to managing instead. He's the best manager there is except my husband. You can trust him to keep his word and do the right thing. He's been a kind, good friend to me, I can tell you. Not but what he's "near" sometimes. I've known him, rich as he is, wait ten minutes for a 'bus to save cab fare. And once he paid for a cab for me, and I said it 'ud be two shillings, and as he had nothing less than half-a-crown, he made me give him sixpence change! Just think of it! and he so rich! But you don't mind

those things coming from him. He's a very good man too. He never mixed with the dirty lot there is on the stage just as there is everywhere else. When he was manager of the Camelot, the girls had to behave themselves. He wouldn't have no nonsense. But my! how some of them hated him for it! Those Dukelles did, and some others of their kidney, though I must say you don't often meet people as bad as them on the stage or off it. It was rather hard on my husband taking the management after such a one as Mr. Blake. But in one way it made it easier: Charlie's *very* particular; and Mrs. Simpson drew herself up proudly at the thought, 'and he won't have any foul talk or slanging behind the scenes, if he can help it.'

Then the conversation turned on the dead wife, and they both began to cry as they spoke of the beauty and short-lived happiness of the one who had been the means of drawing them together.

Then Mrs. Simpson told her hostess of the recent wedding, and of how her 'old dear' had been afraid they wouldn't want her now they were so happy—'and I told her,' said Jane Elizabeth, 'that now there's two of us to want her twice as much as one did. So *she's* all right. Then we've taken on such a poor miserable girl as you never saw. She used to be little slavey in the place where my husband lodged. She's a frightened sort of girl, and her hair is the colour poor Maggie Blake's was. But *she's* a deal cleverer, and *she's* that fond of my husband. I believe *she'd* lick the dirt off his boots sooner than let a spot be on them. She ran away from her place when she found he wasn't coming back to it. My old dear is teaching her a lot of things, for all *she's* blind and can't see. I'm teaching her how to keep herself clean and neat, and do up her hair nicely.'

Thus it will be seen that the hour passed quickly and profitably by, and that over their cup of tea the two ladies began to entertain a very cordial interest in one another.

'You'll come and pay us a visit as soon as we're settled in our new home?' said Mrs. Charlie Simpson as she paused on the step of the saloon carriage Mr. Blake had chartered for his guests, to give Mrs. Paine a hearty farewell kiss.

'Yes, if we go up to London for the annual meetings of the Baptist Missionary Society, we most certainly will,' cried Mrs. Paine, returning the salute, 'and you and your husband must come down here from Saturday to Sunday for a change.'

'She has lifted a mountain weight from off my mind,' mused the minister's wife, 'and what a nice, genuine body she is too! What delightful people we miss in life by being straitlaced or snobbish!'

Late the same evening there was a knock at the door, and Mr. Paine, who was having his much-prized evening smoke, and listening to his wife's charming reading aloud of a new book, put down his pipe and went to see who the visitor might be.

It was Mr. Blake, and bringing him in, a chair was put for him by Mr. Paine—the chair in which he had so often sat in days gone by.

'I came in to say good-bye,' he said very quietly, but Mrs. Paine noted how icy cold his hand was. 'I'm going away to-morrow for an indefinite time, and I want to leave some money with you in case I am absent for long. Half of it is for your charities and for any unforeseen expenses connected with Elsie More, and the other half is to take you and the children away for your summer holiday,' and he handed her an envelope.

'Can we not do something for you in return for all your many kindnesses to us?' cried Mrs. Paine, longing to take those cold hands and warm them as she did her children's when the frost nipped them in the winter.

'You shall do something for me when I know what I want,' was the answer; 'but at present I can only think of one thing,' and he rose to go. 'Anyhow, I shall know where to look when I want friends to do me a good turn. God bless you both, and the little ones,' and then he went.

'Robert,' said Mrs. Paine, thrusting a cheque before him, 'it's for one hundred pounds.'

'And to think,' said her husband, 'that in all the bewilderment of the blow that has fallen upon him he has thought about our summer holiday. May the Lord bless and keep him, and make His face to shine upon him.'

The next morning at ten, Mora and the Colonel were in the strangely altered drawing-room of the Knoll, waiting for Mr. Blake.

'Why may I not come with you?' Harry had asked. 'Blake has been my guest, and I ought to say a few words to him before he goes.'

'You will do as you think best about intruding on him at such a time,' replied Mora decisively, her grief taking on a slight disdain for whatever marred its sacredness, 'but you must not come with us, it would be most unfeeling,' and she ran off, leaving him to his own reflections.

'I want Miss Uraine to come with me for a few moments,' said Mr. Blake. 'You'll be better in the smoking-room,' he turned back to say to the Colonel.

'I'm going to the Continent for a month or so,' he went on to Mora when they reached the morning-room, 'and all the house will be shut up, except the rooms occupied by cook and James, who are to remain

behind as caretakers. But this room that you and Maggie have used together is hers and yours still. Here is the key of it, and I want no one to enter, or touch it, even for cleaning, but yourself, or under your own supervision. I also want you to take these little trinkets of hers, and wear them. I know that next to myself, no one loved my darling as you loved her ; and no one made her so happy. Then I want you to have her dresses. She was, as you know, fond of pretty clothes, and I enjoyed choosing them for her so much, I could not bear to part with them in any other way. They will only spoil by keeping, may I send them to you ?'

Mora nodded her head, but she could not speak ; there was too much to say, and it was so hard to say it, and tears are eloquent after all.

' I shall write now and again,' he went on, ' and when you feel like it I hope you will write to me. I was going to ask you to take care of my darling's cat Snowball, but cook cried, and begged to have it, so I let her.'

' I'm glad you did,' said Mora, finding her voice. ' It will comfort her. We—she will be so awfully lonely when you are gone.'

Then remembering what far worse loneliness waited for him, she plucked up courage, and said—

' I wish you wouldn't go alone. I wish you'd invite father, or even my cousin Harry, to go with you. Do ! ' and she forgot her own grief for a moment, and it was the old impetuous Mora who emphasised that eager ' Do ! '

The effect upon him was that the shadow on his face lifted for a moment, and taking her hand he said, ' It doesn't sound half a bad plan—I'll think of it. But I must go away by myself for a while, it is so difficult

to adjust oneself to the new conditions. But there is one thing I want to say before we part, and that is that if ever I've seemed to be hard on your mistakes, or to have laughed at your ignorance——'

'Oh don't, don't!' interrupted Mora imploringly, and covering her face, feeling that an apology from him to whom she owed so much was insupportable.

'I hope you'll think kindly of it and of me,' he went on, his voice sinking almost into a whisper, 'if not for my sake, for *hers*.'

Mora dropped her hands, and looked into his tear-filled eyes for a moment, and then putting her arms round his neck said, 'For her sake, and yours,' and their lips met in the farewell that neither could speak.

'She has gone home,' said Mr. Blake to the Colonel. 'She wants me to invite you to come with me on my travels; will you do so by and by?'

'Really it sounds a most charming proposal,' rejoined the Colonel. 'I've never been on the Continent. My travels have been confined to Canada and Madeira. Well, let us think about it.'

'You'll have to come as my guest if you do'; and for a while Paul Blake looked like himself again, as they discussed the possibility of such a tour.

An hour afterward Mora, sitting in her mother's bedroom with Aurora on her knee making a sharp contrast to the black dress, heard the carriage going swiftly down the Knoll drive, and knew that her father, brother, and cousin were in it escorting Mr. Blake to the station.

'Anyhow, he's safely out of the way,' said Harry, as with a feeling of relief he saw the train move off with Mr. Blake in it, 'and now there'll be some chance of getting Mora interested in something and some one outside the Knoll.'

As for Mrs. Uraine, Mora, who had learnt to be open with her mother, and had expected some bother over the two large trunks full of beautiful dresses that came over from the Knoll, was greatly surprised at the calm acquiescence with which she viewed the gift both of the clothes and the trinkets ; and the easy way in which she accepted the conditions of the key of the morning-room in that other house.

‘And quite right too, my dear. If that poor dear girl had made a will, she’d have left you everything after all you’ve done for her and suffered on her behalf. It shows very good feeling on Mr. Blake’s part. He hasn’t given you any of her rings, I see. But this pearl brooch is a great beauty. I am glad he has trusted you with that key, it shows he has no thought of letting the house, at any rate for some time to come.’

The wedding dress was not among the things sent her, and Mora wondered as to whose hands had safely folded it away, and whether the costly satin and lace were under lock and key, where neither thief nor rot could get at them ?

She would have had no misgivings on that point if she had seen the cook, under her master’s careful directions, folding up the precious gown with soft paper between every fold, and laying it in a fine linen sheet, sewing up the corners with such minuteness that not even a moth could creep in.

It was then laid in a long tin box, which was carefully soldered down by James, who rarely smiled for thinking of the girl away in Woking Prison. But he smiled a sort of washed-out smile at the cook, when his master had silently left the room,

‘If that gets stolen, the thieves’ll have to carry the box away as it is.’

## CHAPTER XXI

### MR. BLAKE'S FIRST TENANT

HARRY was standing before the fireplace in the breakfast-room, and Mora, still looking very pale with the shock of grief that had come to her during the past fortnight, was making the coffee for breakfast. The window was wide open, and the sweet scents of a May morning came wandering in, with the sound of hammering wafted up the hill from the busy site of Sellcuts' in the town below.

'I'm going back to London to-day,' he said, 'and on to Rome to-morrow. Once again, and for the last time, won't you get uncle to come with you, and let me take you to mother?'

'No,' said Mora, 'it's too bad to say no to you so many times, and I really would like to see aunt Margetson, and my cousins, and Rome, and all the beautiful things; but I want to stay with mother for the present, and try and be of some use to her. Besides, next time I leave home it won't be on a pleasure visit. I have a plan in my head.'

'You're not going to do anything strong-minded, I hope,' he cried in some alarm, 'because if you are, I'll get father to interfere.'

'You can save yourself the trouble,' she replied with

a dignity that had some haughtiness in it, 'I shall do nothing that will require Uncle Bowdwin's interference.'

'That's right,' he replied, wincing a little, however; 'and I say, Mora? you'll have to be on your guard with that young Ross. I heard him tell Ted he admired you very much.'

'Is that all?' said Mora, colouring a little; 'you quite relieve my mind. I thought from your tone you were going to tell me to keep an eye on the spoons.'

'Don't be sarcastic,' he grumbled, 'it isn't nice.'

'Don't be superfluous then,' she retorted, 'it isn't nice.'

Somehow all their *tête-à-têtes* had a way of coming to a violent end; and Harry strode out of the room to go and blow off some of his vexation on the lawn.

The Colonel was strolling up and down and waiting for the gong to sound, and his nephew made a dash at a forlorn hope with him.

'I wish you and Mora would come back with me to Rome,' he said. 'She wants a change very badly, and mother would be so delighted to see you.'

'You are very kind, my boy,' replied his uncle, taking his arm, 'but I think Mora had best keep her mother company for a bit. As for me, if I do go to the Continent, it will be to join poor Blake.'

'Always Blake,' thought Harry savagely, and the gong sounding they went in to breakfast.

The meal was a more comfortable one than formerly, inasmuch as Mr. Ross had revolted politely the very first morning.

'Oh but I cannot do a morning's work on bread and butter,' he said, 'I can't eat enough of it! Please have some meat, or eggs, or something brought in.'

So the Colonel had joyfully pulled the bell, and

ordered the astonished Parker to bring up the cold lamb, and have toast made.

'There'll have to be some changes now he's come,' said she significantly to the cook, 'and a good job too! I shouldn't wonder if I didn't find myself carrying bacon up to the breakfast-room before long.'

And it was even so; for when Mrs. Uraine was informed by her husband that work for examinations could not be successfully done on a régime that may perhaps be suitable for a lady who isn't taking much exercise, she saw that a conflict between herself and her son's tutor was inevitable, and climbed down with much skill and diplomacy to avoid it.

'That's the worst of taking strangers into one's family circle,' she said; 'but of course we want him to do his best for Ted.'

So now of a morning the savoury odours of a comfortable breakfast in preparation required no more summoning of Parker to inquire where the smell came from, nor angry shutting of windows by way of protest.

But on this morning the meal was an unusually silent one. Harry was decidedly cross. Ted was late, and ate his share of things in a great hurry, and the Colonel, who rarely opened his letters till after breakfast, had one with a foreign stamp on it, so Mora, with her eye on that stamp, longed for the meal to end.

Mr. Ross was a quiet, self-possessed young man, and his manners being much pleasanter than her cousin Harry's, the only words spoken during breakfast-time by his young hostess were to him.

'Which of Shakespeare's plays ought one to read first, Mr. Ross?' she asked as she handed him his second cup of coffee.

'Oh, I think a novice should begin on *The Merchant of Venice*,' he answered kindly; 'if you like to join

your brother in his readings of it, I shall be most happy to take you through it.'

Mora's face lighted up with so sudden a glow of pleasure that Harry's combativeness was once more aroused, and he said rather bitterly—

'I once advised Miss Uraine to read *All's Well That Ends Well*, and she wouldn't do it.'

But Mr. Ross innocently took up the cudgels for Mora, saying—

'Circumstances alter cases. Miss Uraine's tastes may have changed,' which added much to Mr. Margetson's displeasure with things in general.

At last the Colonel seated himself in the low chair by the open window, and opened the letter with the foreign stamp.

'It's from Blake, and he's at Geneva,' he said to Mora, who went and knelt by his side to read the letter with him.

It was a very long one, giving admirable accounts of his sojourn in Paris, Basle, and Geneva; but there was an undercurrent of loneliness in it that brought the swift tears to Mora's eyes. There was also a postscript:

'Sauntering along the Palais Royal one night I met a gray-haired man arm-in-arm with a very handsomely dressed woman. I should not have recognised him if he had not spoken as they passed me, when he said in French to his companion, and it was Dukelle's voice, 'Good God! there's Blake!' I did my best to follow them, but lost track of them in some mysterious way, so I conclude he is at his old game of sponging on some woman's favour. I should have handed him over to the police if I could have caught him. But I mean to make it my one object in life to bring him to justice.'

'Oh, I hope he won't!' cried Mora, blanching at the thought. 'That awful man would stab him if he got the chance. Father dear, write and warn him to keep out of harm's way, to let Dukelle go free rather than run the risk of his revenge.'

That morning Harry left them, but when Mora went to give him the usual parting salute he drew back, and said gruffly—

'You are getting too old to kiss. When you were a girl it was different.'

'So it was,' she said, also drawing back; and looking at him with a curious inscrutable look in her eyes, blushed deeply, and ran off without waiting to see him get into the cab.

'Well, I've made a pretty ass of myself,' remarked Mr. Harry in his solitude, 'and yet I'm not sorry. What a disagreeable woman she will make! She won't get any one to marry her at the rate she's going. Not even Ross!'

'Poor old boy!' cried Mora when she got into the turret-room. 'I never guessed that he meant anything till now. I'm sorry if I've hurt him, he's been so very kind to me at different times. But I could never love *him*, never! His manners are too bad.'

In the afternoon she went over to the Knoll for the first time since the farewell, and found the cook exceedingly glad to see her.

'It's a bit lonely without the master and missis,' she said, and she gladly offered to escort Mora over the house and grounds. 'Seeing as you know 'em all so well,' she added.

Finding that the afternoon was waning, Mora got rid of her at last; and putting the key into the lock opened the morning-room door and went in.

The place smelt very close and stuffy after having

been shut up for more than a week, so she drew up the blind, and unfastened the French window.

Then she opened the familiar drawers where she and Maggie had kept all their treasures of needle-work, and various odds and ends.

'Can it only be three weeks ago since we began this?' she mused, as she held up a half-finished penwiper.

Somehow she could not cry as she went carefully over the various ornaments with a duster the cook had given her, and tenderly flicked some dust off one or two of the picture frames. It did not seem possible, now that she was in there by herself, that Maggie would never again be in there with her; and unconsciously she began to place the Maggie who lived in her memory in the chair where once the Maggie who had died from sight had sat; and the memorised Maggie became from henceforth the real one who could not be cried for because she was always there, and could even be talked to now that there was no one else to listen.

So after that first visit Mora came frequently, and her mother, finding that her cheeks filled out and took on colour again after one or two visits to 'Maggie's and my room' as she called it, was glad enough to let her go.

'Doesn't Mr. Bleby come and do your hair as he used?' Mora ventured to ask her mother one day, for she had been at home now for four successive Fridays, and there had been no mention of Mr. Bleby's day, nor even of his name.

'No, my dear,' was the answer; 'Mr. Bleby is not what he used to be.'

'Will you let me do it for you, mother?' cried Mora. 'You have such beautiful hair. I saw how it

was done in the hospital. I would be so careful not to hurt.'

Not without some misgiving Mrs. Uraine consented, and indeed she would far rather have had what in her heart she considered a 'menial office' performed by Parker, or if Brombridge had contained him, another hairdresser.

But she was conscientiously anxious to help Mora find plenty to do, Dr. Slaney having spoken words of deep wisdom to her on that point. 'The more she has to do the less likely she is to become suddenly unnerved,' he said. So the successor to Mr. Bleby was Miss Mora Uraine; and she became so expert, having both natural skill and love to guide her, that her mother secretly wondered why she had put up with her former hairdresser so long.

Now it must not be inferred that the mother and daughter passed from all the misunderstanding and apartness of years in such a short time into complete harmony and unbroken sympathetic intercourse; and if the truth must be told, they had some awkward places still to get over. Mora took not the very least interest in either the Panjandrum Society, or the mark of the Beast, the seventh horn, the number 666, or the indubitable connection between the missing tribes of Israel and the leading families of English aristocracy. Nor did Mrs. Uraine look upon Mora's study of Shakespeare as anything more important than a refined waste of time, permitted only when there was nothing else to do in the household.

But each had received deep hurts from the other, and each had done her best to atone and to forgive; also they had been together in the sacred, tender company of the dead, and been anointed with the holy chrism of a pure and unworldly grief, therefore it was

impossible for Mora to feel the old blind resentment, or for Mrs. Uraine to impose the old blind restrictions; so when the latter's bed rock of cold propriety showed too sharply where her heart-soil was thin, Mora strove not to see it, and dexterously turned the subject, or made an excuse for going out of the room; but she neither lied nor resorted to subterfuge, nor did she retort more or less saucily as she had begun to do before the catastrophe.

On Mrs. Uraine's side there was much concession of long-cherished platitudes and decorums, and when she found herself confronted by her daughter's strong will and quick impulsive sympathy, she either combated it respectfully and with much tact, or she gave in as gracefully as circumstances permitted.

So the summer months passed, and life was on the whole a very much happier thing at Brombridge Hall than it had ever been before.

To please Mr. Carmichael, who was a more frequent visitor than formerly, Mora took a Sunday afternoon class of factory girls, and soon became an enthusiast on the subject of working women. Grace Margetson came to stay with the Uraines also, and being a wholesome, light-hearted young person, her visit did Mora a great deal of good. Then came an earnest appeal for the Colonel to join Mr. Blake at Grindelwald, and Mrs. Uraine and the two girls were left alone, Ted and Mr. Ross having gone to Scotland.

'May I learn dancing?' said Mora suddenly to her mother one day. 'I won't go to dances if you don't wish me to, but I'm so clumsy compared with Grace.'

'I've never approved of dancing,' said Mrs. Uraine cautiously, 'however, I'll think about it'; and indeed she herself had occasionally found fault somewhat

tartly with her daughter for stumbling over a chair or a stool, and for stooping.

So Mora knew that yet another outpost had been taken, and she duly announced the fact to her father and Mr. Blake in a long and very amusing letter: 'I am sitting at the feet of Miss Mimsey's dancing-master,' she wrote, 'or rather he's sitting on mine.'

'Do write to me all you can find time to say if your mother will be so very kind as to allow you to do so,' Mr. Blake had written from Rome, whither they had wended their way when Switzerland had become too cold.

So the fortnightly letter to Mr. Blake had become a recognised institution, while those from him were looked forward to with as much pleasure by Mrs. Uraine as by Mora herself.

'Mother has led a very starved life,' she said one day to Grace, 'she's only now, for the first time, being fed by a world outside her own'; and from that hour when the conviction forced itself on her, Mora began to read up some of the Panjandrum Society's tracts, and succeeded in discovering that they were not wholly idiotic and ill-natured as she had once imagined them to be, and the joy that her new growth in grace gave Mrs. Uraine was a fair equivalent for some of the boredom it imposed upon Mora herself. Consequently, when the Colonel returned from his tour with Mr. Blake, he found his wife looking younger than she had done for years. Also ever since the funeral there had existed a kindly intercourse between the Uraines and the Paines, and again an outpost had been taken when Mora was allowed to have the little boys at the Hall to take care of late in October, a fourth baby having come to add to the joys and cares of the household of the Baptist minister.

'They are such dear little fellows!' she cried enthusiastically, after she had put them to bed one night. 'How I do envy their mother!' and she actually cried when, at the end of the week, their father came and fetched them home.

'You had better not go across to the Knoll in this rough wind, had you?' the Colonel remarked one wintry afternoon when the fierce gusts were blowing the few remaining leaves off the trees, and hurling them in crisp eddies along the drive.

'Oh, I shan't be very long,' said Mora. 'But Mr. Blake's cook has a swollen face, and mother is sending her some camomile flowers for a fomentation.'

It was characteristic of Mora that she put on the soothing fomentation and tied up the suffering face herself.

'I wish James 'ud come back soon,' said the cook. 'It's so lonesome here by yourself when you're ill.'

By the time Mora had finished her ministrations it was growing somewhat dusky, so she decided not to visit the morning-room that day.

She was walking briskly down the drive, and had reached the part where the shrubs grew thickest and the beeches met overhead, when some one sprang suddenly out of the laurels, and seized her tightly by the arm.

For a moment her heart seemed to stand still with fear, and a sound like thunder roared in her ears.

Then, being a plucky girl, and patrician withal, she pulled herself together and cried—

'How dare you touch me! Who are you? What do you want?'

'Only to know who's in the Knoll just now,' answered a man's voice, and her arm was released.

'He's a burglar,' thought Mora, and her courage rose.

'There are the grooms and James,' she said calmly, wondering how she could detain him till help came. 'Which of them do you want?'

'Oh, I don't want either of *them*, my dear. It's the lady I want to see; is she at home? You've just been paying her a call, haven't you?'

'The lady? Whom do you mean?' said Mora, parrying on behalf of the helpless and lonely cook.

'Why, Mrs. Blake, of course. Is she at home? She's an old friend of mine.'

'Mrs. Blake,' said Mora solemnly. 'Mrs. Blake is at home, but it's in heaven. She is dead.'

'Oh, then she's dead, is she?' continued the man. 'How long has she been dead, and where's her husband?' But at that moment James came whistling up the drive, and the stranger jumped back into the bushes.

'Is that you, James?' cried Mora in a careless voice. 'There's been some one inquiring for poor Mrs. Blake. Would you have thought there was any one who didn't know she was dead? Mind you unchain the dogs!' and, leaving James considerably mystified, she ran out of the Knoll gate and in at her own, tearing frantically up the drive, and startling the servants' hall by a long and continuous pull at the bell.

Parker opened the door promptly, and Mora dashed in, calling 'Father! Ted! Mr. Ross! Quick, all of you!'

'My darling girl, what's the matter?' cried her father, rushing out from the library and somewhat scared at her appearance, for her hat had fallen off and her hair had come down, also she was panting wildly and holding her hand to her side.

'Father,' she gasped, 'there's such a dreadful man hiding in Mr. Blake's bushes! He's nearly pinched

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my arm off! He's come to see Mrs. Blake. I'm sure he's a burglar, and cook is so lonely, and James isn't much of it. Do send for the police.'

In a few moments there was much suppressed excitement in Brombridge Hall; and Ted and Mr. Ross, arming themselves with revolvers and big walking-sticks, made for the Knoll with all possible speed by the back way.

'That's no burglar,' said the Colonel to himself, as he rode at a canter down to the police station in the High Street. 'If I mistake not, it's the very man we most want to get hold of. It's Dukelle, senior, and he's come thinking to blackmail his daughter again.'

'I can soon polish James off,' thought the man in the shrubs, as he waited to hear the stable door shut, 'and the rest will be easy enough. The devil hasn't come home yet, that's evident. I wonder who that girl was. She's not one of the servants. Perhaps a visitor. Anyhow I won't have all this long journey for nothing.'

By and by he crept stealthily along the bushes till he was facing the drawing-room window.

'There are no lights,' he said, 'and there's no sound. It looks as if it were empty. I shall try the library.'

Now Ted and Mr. Ross and James, being valiant, had placed themselves in ambush, the one at the drawing-room window, behind a hole cut for the purpose in the blind, as watcher of the shrubs, and the other two at the glazed door in the corridor which opened out on to that part of the lawn.

The watcher James was to give the signal, and the other two were to rush out directly their quarry appeared in sight, and secure him.

By and by he emerged from the bushes, and the foolish James, instead of giving the soft whistle agreed

on, lost his head, and shouted, 'There he is ! there he is !' and rushing madly over the linen-covered carpet, tripped his foot in a chair leg and fell.

In vain did Ted and Mr. Ross make a frantic dash out of the little door, catching a momentary glimpse of the tall figure of the supposed burglar as they did so; the latter retreated swiftly into the shrubs, and, with the cunning born of long experience, remained perfectly still against the trunk of a weeping beech, while the two young men were wildly tearing down through the bushes into the drive, where they expected to find their man running for his life.

'Oh, the fools,' he said with a grim smile, 'I could have put a bullet through them both as safe as sin.' Then, after waiting till they had got down into the road, still madly pursuing, as they thought, he coolly and deliberately made his way by the back across to the Uraines' fowl-run, and clambering up the wall that held up some higher ground, made his way with increasing speed in the direction of Kingsboro' Moor.

'There are some half-built houses along the road,' he muttered to himself; 'at least that's what Rachel said—some that Blake's building for his workpeople. He'll have me for first tenant. Damn him !'

The wind was rising higher and higher as he toiled along in the teeth of it, and consequently the sound of horse-hoofs and wheels on the road below and behind him did not reach his ears.

'We'll turn out every available man there is, and scour the country till we find him,' said the Chief-Constable. 'It's a year to-day since Sellcuts' was burned down.'

So Colonel Uraine and two mounted police went along the high road, and the Chief-Constable and two more took the upper one, past the Knoll and Brom-

bridge Hall, to Kingsboro', while several volunteers, including Mr. Ferrel, who was holding a temporary position in the works, were pressed into service in the Queen's name, and the chase began.

The Chief-Constable's contingent soon overtook the two young men who were in hot and undaunted pursuit.

'Better go back and protect the Knoll,' he said. 'We shall get on faster than you; he may be plotting some devilment against the house itself, and have accomplices. Better see that Mr. Blake's telephone is in working order, and ring up the police office to make sure'; and with these brief directions he spurred on his horse, leaving Mr. Ross and Ted to make their way back with all speed.

'The darkness is favouring him,' mused the Constable, 'and this wind; but he's not a young man; he'll soon get blown out. Ten to one he'll make for those new houses of Blake's. They're the only shelter before you get to the beginning of the moor.'

So while the Colonel was scouring the fields and lanes lying near the gaol, and Mr. Ferrel and others the open meadows beyond Hadding Lane, that old experienced dog, the Chief-Constable, who knew almost to a yard the track a man with a guilty secret would take, was getting closer on to the scent of Mr. James Dukelle.

'He'll be twenty minutes behind us,' he whispered to his men, 'so we'll dismount and take up a position behind the hedge, commanding a view of the short cut out of the wood. There's just light enough to see him by. Dickson, you take the horses back a hundred yards or so, and put them on the grass to keep them quiet. If I whistle, come.'

It was nearly an hour before the quick ear of the Chief heard the angry barking of the woodman's dog

and a low voice bidding it shut up, and he knew that some stranger was about.

'What a cursed wind!' said Dukelle with an oath, after he had silenced the dog; 'it cuts through one like a knife,' and he stopped for a moment to take a mouthful from a flask he carried.

When he emerged from the deep shadow of the wood, he felt a drop of rain on his face. 'The quicker I get into some sort of shelter the better. To hell with you!' he muttered fiercely, as a long arm of bramble caught his foot and attached itself to his trousers. 'It's as quiet as the grave here. Yes, those are the houses, without doubt. I wonder if there's a watchman. I don't want to have to use you,' he remarked to his revolver; 'the wind might carry the sound, and make an alarm.'

Again a fiercer blast of wind drove him over the bare rising ground—this time in the direction of his pursuers—and his outline—tall, gaunt, and stooping—was gazed upon in the deepening twilight with a feeling closely akin to rapture, by the two men who had him within covering distance of a safe shot.

The houses, which were of the six-room and wash-house type, and all detached, were sufficiently advanced to be roofed in, but not glazed; so there was no difficulty in getting into them by the window holes, the doorways being carefully boarded up to keep tramps from sleeping there at nights.

Dukelle chose the one nearest to where the two men waited, and clambered in at the window space.

'There's a cellar,' he said; 'that'll do to sleep in for to-night. At any rate it's water-tight,' and he struck a match to look for the descent into it.

There was nothing but a hole in the boards, and beneath it a barrel to step down upon, and as his

weight reached the rotten thing, it gave way, and he fell on to the cement flooring.

For a few moments he was so shaken he could not get up, and when he did, he found that he could not stretch his full height under the low ceiling ; and he swore again under his breath, for he had knocked his head against the rough roof, and it had jerked the match-box out of his hand. So he had to go down on his hands and knees to feel about for the matches. It took a long time to pick them up in the dark, as they were much scattered, and his hands were cold.

While he was doing so, he could hear the terrible roaring of the wind, and a sound of bricks or tiles being blown about.

'Anyhow I shall have it all to myself on such a blasted night as this,' he said, and he lighted another match, to get a better view of his night's lodging. As he did so, he cursed the night, and the pain in his head, and the girl that had told him of Maggie's death.

'Plague on her death ! I'd have squeezed something handsome out of her this time, and no mistake,' he said. 'Rachel's got her sister safe enough under lock and key, and she'd have had to pay up, or own to her. But now she's dead the best thing I can do is to get back, and Rachel must try something else. She's bound to. She knows I can hand her over to the police. She'll do the same by me when she gets the chance. What the devil is that ?' he cried, as a quantity of something that sounded like brickwork came crashing down the hole, filling the darkness with powdered mortar and clay. Then came another, and yet another crash, and instinctively he moved away from the heap, part of which had reached his boots in the squatting position he had taken up.

Then he lighted yet another match, and found to

his dismay that a large pile of loose bricks had filled up the space from the floor to the hole, and that he would have to clear them away before he could get out.

'The sooner I do that the better,' he reflected, 'but it's a beastly job.'

For a while he toiled at the hopeless task, tugging more and more fiercely at the bricks, as a fearful thought began to shape itself in the damp, horrible darkness.

'If it's water-tight, it's air-tight; and if I can't get this confounded hole clear, what then?'

Ah, what then? And as he grubbed and grasped, fighting now for life and breath, the darkness seemed to become alive round him, and a confused murmur of voices began to surge in his ear like the rising of water in the Devil's Hole, Jersey, where he had once gone with his first wife during the one human episode in his wicked and cruel life—his wedding trip.

Then, because his hands were beginning to bleed and hurt him, he stopped for a minute and felt for his handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his brow, and in his brain he suddenly looked on a scene in which Maggie, with blood on her hands, was crying, 'Don't, father, don't!'

'Bah!' he said, 'what folly to recall things like that. The girl was a lazy young brute, and deserved it.'

Then his brain played him another trick, and Maggie lay, as if dead, on the property sofa in the green-room of the Camelot, and Mr. Blake, with his eyes blazing, was leaning over her prostrate body and crying—

'Oh, you black scoundrel, you! As sure as there's a God in heaven you shall pay for this!'

Somehow the latter reminiscence was more unpleasant to him than the other, and made him tremble.

'It's want of air,' he said ; 'I must go at it again,' and after taking another pull at the flask, and remarking that it was fortunate he had filled it at the 'Diadem' on his way from the station, he began again displacing the bricks, only to find that each laboriously-made vacancy was promptly filled up from above, and that the mass was becoming more closely jammed by its own weight.

'What are you doing there, you young gaol-bird ?' he cried in a sudden fit of fury, as Lardy sat before him in a corner of the cellar, with a strange, wan light around him.

'I'm dreaming it !' he continued. 'He's got ten years. He's safe enough in prison, and his father's safe enough out of it. Ha, ha, ha !' and he laughed a loud laugh to show the pale dream that he was not afraid of it.

Then it was all dark around him again, and he sat down on the floor to draw breath.

'It's hard work that, and I'm not accustomed to hard work. I've always made other people do that for me. How quiet the night is ! There's not a sound !' and he began humming the tune of a song he once had to sing underneath his lady's window on the stage, when Maggie was the lady and he was the lover.

'When I get out of this I shall make my way to South America, and leave Rachel to fight it out with the Simpsons as she best can,' he said, and remembering that it must be close on bedtime he leant up against the wall and went to sleep for a minute or two.

Suddenly he woke up, trying to strike out at some one who was grasping him by the throat. He tried to call for help, but his voice made no sound, and the strong hands gripped him tighter.

He tried to call for mercy, to say that if only he were let off this time he would do differently in the

future. He prayed his assailant to give him air, only one little breath, for God's sake.

'God,' he repeated—'God!'

A dead body was lying in the mortuary of Brombridge Gaol a week after the great storm which had blown down part of the battlement of the eastern tower of Kingsboro' Castle, and the incomplete houses Mr. Blake was having put up for the workpeople engaged on the new Sellcuts'.

Mr. Charles Simpson had come down from London to identify the corpse at the bidding of Scotland Yard and the Brombridge police, and as he looked on the cadaverous face, with its cruel jaw, he had no difficulty in recalling the fright that same face had given him nearly a year ago, in spite of the long white moustache and iron-gray hair that had supervened on a clean-shaved upper lip and locks of the blackest.

'Yes,' he said decisively, 'there's no doubt that's all that's left of James Dukelle, the best tragic actor and the worst blackguard that ever was.'

The Chief-Constable and the Governor were present, and the former told in brief, vivid language of how he and his man were just about to enter the empty house into which Dukelle had escaped, when a furious blast of wind broke off the main branch of the elm standing alongside, and hurled it with such force on to the roof that its weight bore a part of it away and knocked out some of the side wall, so the two had hastily retired to shelter under the hedge again so as to make sure their prisoner did not escape.

The storm increasing in fury, the Chief had decided, after two hours of patient waiting in the gale and the storm of rain that fell in the intervals, to return to Brombridge, and resume the pursuit in the morning.

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On reaching the spot about six or so his considerably augmented party found an indescribable scene of wreckage and confusion, the rest of the elm tree blown completely down, and all the projected dwellings demolished.

It was several days before crowbars and picks had made sufficient way for the searchers to penetrate to the cellar where the wretched man had been buried alive.

His face and hands bore signs of severe struggle, and there were traces of blood from his torn palms on the bricks around him.

His watch had stopped at twelve, and the flask had not been emptied.

'A horrible death to die. Alone ; in the dark ; and knowing that not one single human being wished you well,' said Mr. Paine in his address at the church social that night. 'But think of the strange, inexorable justice that never relaxed its grip on that wretched rascal's life, till it brought him into the cellar of the man he had so deeply wronged, and buried him alive in it. Truly "the way of transgressors is hard," though if you and I had seen him living in luxury at Monte Carlo or in Paris, we should not have thought so then. Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small.'

## CHAPTER XXII

### MR. BLAKE'S RETURN

'MOTHER,' said Mora, a few weeks after the great storm, 'will you let me go away and learn nursing in a London hospital. Alicia has done so, and she says she's never enjoyed anything so much.'

'A great many ladies of good position are doing it,' replied her mother thoughtfully, 'but I hope you wouldn't let it spoil your hands. I could not give my consent to that. But what has put it into your head? You are quite happy at home.'

'I have thought about it ever since I was at St George's,' answered Mora, colouring, for she did not like alluding to that escapade of hers, in spite of all the good results that had sprung from it.

'But how do you get taken in?' asked her mother.

'Oh, that's easy enough if you are accepted and there's a vacancy,' cried Mora, pulling a long envelope out of her pocket. 'Here's the form. I need two references. Mr. Carmichael will be one, I daresay, and Mr. Paine the other.'

'But how long will you want to be away?' asked her mother, ruefully reflecting on the deft shampooing of her hair and a few other little services which Mora

performed so much more daintily than her maid could ever hope to do.

'I should set myself three months,' said Mora, who had been corresponding most minutely with her cousin Alicia, and had acquainted herself with all the details.

'And how much will it cost? There's that to be thought of,' continued Mrs. Uraine.

'Oh, that's all right, mother!' cried Mora exultantly. 'You know I haven't had any new clothes to buy for nearly a year, and I have saved £20 out of my allowance.'

'Well, child, it will be useful to you all your life,' replied her mother cordially, for, to tell the truth, she was beginning to have grave misgivings as to those Shakespeare readings with Ted and Mr. Ross—chiefly the latter. 'It will be very awkward if he falls in love with her,' she mused to herself on several occasions when Mr. Ross had put his head into the breakfast-room, saying, with evident pleasure, 'Don't forget *Hamlet* at 11 A.M. to-day, Miss Uraine.'

Naturally the Colonel grumbled quite forcibly for him, and for a time Mora was afraid that her easy-going father was going to be more difficult to manage than her more opinionative mother.

'Alicia is there, you know, Henry,' said his wife, 'so Mora will not be alone.'

'Oh, it isn't that,' said Colonel Uraine, but he said no more, and finally gave in.

Now, the Great Central Hospital was in a transition stage from nurses of the old-fashioned can't-read-or-write-or-sew-or-cook-so-must-go-out-nursing type, and was very glad to get young ladies of Alicia and Mora's kind—young, enthusiastic, well bred, and intelligent, and who paid for their keep, and sometimes turned out

first-rate, so Mora was accepted as a paying probationer, and taken in without much delay.

'For goodness sake don't let the servants see you trying on your caps and aprons,' said her mother in a fright just the day before she left home, and meeting her on the way from Ted's study, where she had been to exhibit herself in her new uniform to him, Mr. Ross being out. 'I don't know what they'll think. It will get talked of all over the town.'

For a few days after entering the hospital, Mora felt very strange and somewhat forlorn in her new world.

It was one thing to be a special patient, accorded special privileges, in a hospital like St. George's; it was quite another thing to be Probationer Uraine amongst other probationers in a place like the Great Central; and the first time she was called upon to wash a very dirty patient with a densely-populated head, she felt like packing up her things and going back home without delay.

Then she had to share a small and most inconvenient bedroom with two others, and she felt keenly the want of solitude at night, and a place in which to put her things.

Alicia was in the Men's Accident Ward, so the cousins did not have many chances of meeting; and altogether it was at first a somewhat disappointing experience.

The Sister under whose care she was placed was not a lady, and was a very imperious person; but she was warm-hearted, and a good judge of character.

'You mustn't mind if I speak sharp to you,' she said on the fourth evening after Mora's advent; 'one has to be sharp to get things done in time. But you're getting on very well, and I'm quite pleased to have you.'

So Mora, cheered by a little well-meant encouragement, learned to treat the sharp incisive orders with cheerful alacrity, and soon became tolerably happy and at home in her new sphere.

One little shadow, however, rested in her heart, and that was that there had been no letter from Mr. Blake for nearly two months. He had written so regularly every fortnight since his departure eight months ago, that a foreboding of some illness or calamity began to give an unusual gravity to her face, and put a new note of sadness into her voice.

It was mostly at night that the thought of him had time to weigh her down; and the thoughtless chatter of her two bedroom mates seemed like mockery of the efforts she made to ease the burden of misgiving in prayer for him who was so lonely and far away.

One night, as she was lying awake thinking of him, the thought suddenly flashed across her, 'What if he should marry again!'

Next morning her two companions were gentler than usual to her, and looked at her with new compassion in their eyes.

'How she *did* cry last night,' said one to another. 'Do you think she's getting home-sick?'

Into the ward that afternoon was brought a new patient suffering from cancer, and evidently suffering terribly.

'Probationer Uraine,' said the Sister, 'will you take this case in hand. She's to have special nursing. There'll be an operation by and by,—most likely to-morrow.'

The woman was not a pleasant woman, and spoke in a surly, taciturn way; but Mora set it down to the dreadful pain she was in.

'It's a fearful case,' said the surgeon to the Sister.

'I doubt if any operation can save her. She appears to have been a very hard drinker.'

The woman groaned a great deal, and refused everything that was offered her, except some weak tea without milk or sugar in it.

'Will they let a friend in to see me any hour of day or night?' she asked, turning those large agonised eyes of hers beseechingly up to Mora's tender face.

'You'd better put her name on the Dangerous List,' said the Sister, when Mora rushed off to her with the woman's question, 'and then her friends can be shown up whenever they come.'

That evening about nine a lady entered the ward to see Mrs. Dag. It was Mrs. Simpson, bonny and buxom ; but Mora did not, of course, recognise her as having been at Maggie Blake's funeral.

'It wasn't I took Maria away from you,' said the woman eagerly, in spite of her pain ; 'and I've meant many a time to send her back to you since James's death, but I was afraid you'd set the police on to me.'

'We should have done so to a dead certainty,' said Mrs. Simpson ; 'but I'll promise you not to do so now if you'll be fair and above-board with me. Maria came back to us this afternoon.'

'Here,' said the woman, fumbling under her pillow, 'here's the proof that she was James Dukelle's child and Maggie's sister. It was to get Maria to help him get the takings from your husband the first night of *Mephistopheles* he hid in the empty house next to Mrs. Best's. Him and her was cronies once. It was the policeman coming on the scene put a stop to his plans. Here's the key of my room. You can have all that's in it. Don't open it till I'm dead. It won't be long now. I've been a wicked woman, and ruined many a girl in my time ; but I'd give something to hear that

Mr. Blake had forgiven me before I die. I'm glad the Cut's gone.'

'He's in London,' said Mrs. Simpson. 'I'll tell him what you say.'

'Sister says the patient has been talking long enough for one time,' said Mora, touching Mrs. Simpson on the arm. 'Won't you come and see her to-morrow?' she continued, as they walked down the ward to the door.

'Yes, I will, replied the other, 'or send some one else. What an awful end to a wicked life,' but this last remark was to herself.

'Don't you cry, now, like you did last night,' said one of the two other probationers after Mora had got into bed. 'It doesn't mend things. If it did, we should, some of us, be always crying.'

'Did I cry?' asked Mora in astonishment. 'It must have been in my sleep then.'

The next afternoon was fixed for the operation, and the Sister informed Mora that the patient was to be ready at two to go up to the theatre.

'I don't think I will let you come,' she added kindly; 'you are not yet sufficiently seasoned for such an ordeal. So you will assist Probationer Allen in the ward, while Probationer Kemp takes your place upstairs.'

While Mora was standing at the ward table fastening a pad on a splint somewhere about three o'clock, and wondering how the patient was going on, she heard the ward door open, and turned quickly to see Mr. Blake walk in.

For a moment it would be hard to say which of the two was the more astounded.

'You here, and a nurse!' he cried. 'Am I dreaming?'

But Mora seized his hand in her old impetuous way, and dragged him off to the Sister's sitting-room. It was simply intolerable to see him for the first time since that pitiful May morning, with the hospital patients for spectators, and the ward beds for background.

'There's no ring here yet,' he went on, holding up her third finger.

'Did you expect there would be?' she asked reproachfully, and wondering what he was alluding to.

Your cousin Harry told me you were about to be engaged to your brother's tutor.'

'But you didn't believe it, did you?' cried Mora, drawing her hand away.

'How could I do anything else?' he said. 'Anyhow, I came post-haste from Carrara to see if there was any truth in it.'

'And if there had been, what would you have done?' she said faintly without looking up.

I should have knocked the whole thing on the head at once,' he replied.

Then Mora turned quickly to him, her whole face lit up with a joy so rare and exquisite that she hardly knew where she was, or what she was doing, and met once again that smile of his that had transformed her whole life only a year and a few odd months ago.

'What if Sister should come and catch us,' she said at last as she lifted her head, and its somewhat crumpled cap, from his heart.

'Never mind if she does. I want to hear you say, "Paul, I loved you for Maggie's sake, and now I love you for your own," before I let you go.'

So Mora said it, but was hardly allowed to finish the sentence.

'Now to commonplace and humdrum duty,' he

said. 'We have a thousand things to say to each other. When can you get off?'

'I have from six to eight to-night,' said Mora, clinging to the lapels of his coat.

'Well, then, you be ready. I'll send a carriage for you, and we'll drive somewhere and talk. But now I must explain that you are the last person in the world I came to see this afternoon. My visit was to that wretched Miss L'Estrange, otherwise Mrs. Rachel Dag, who is in with cancer. I just want to speak a word with her.'

So Mora told him of the operation, and then remembered that she ought to be back in the ward.

'I'll wait here a little while,' said Paul. 'You can tell the Sister I wish to see her as soon as she is disengaged.'

It was very hard to go back into the ward and know that Paul Blake was within a few yards of her. But oh! the glow of heart with which she went on with the padding of that other splint compared with the mild sense of duty with which its twin had been done.

'To think of what lies between those two wooden things!' she sighed, with a deep sigh of contentment.

At that moment the ward door was opened wide, and the porters, carrying the Operating Theatre stretcher, bore in the still form of the cancer patient.

'You two see to her,' whispered the Sister to Mora, 'I'm knocked over. It was awful. I must get some tea.'

'You'll find a gentleman in your room, Sister,' replied Mora, 'he is waiting to speak to you.'

'Wait a little, sir,' said the Sister, sinking into her chair, and closing her eyes for a moment as the gentleman rose to greet her.

Paul took in the case at once, and having noted a cupboard in the room during his brief solitude, went to

it, and found some business-like and bulky bottles labelled for various spirituous beverages. Choosing the one marked 'Sherry,' he poured out some into the medicine glass, and held it to the Sister's white lips, saying in that tender voice of his—

'Come, drink this. It will do you good.'

'You are very considerate, sir,' she said, reviving somewhat under the influence of the wine and the attention.

'I've learnt to be so in a difficult school,' he said gravely; and looking more carefully at him she noted with quick feminine perception how beautiful his face was, and that he was in black.

'It's been a most shocking operation,' she said with a shudder; 'I've seen a great many, but never a worse one. They've had to remove the whole of the breast and a part of the under arm.'

'Cancer, isn't it?' asked Mr. Blake, with a swift horror darting through his mind as to what part Mora would have to take in the nursing of it.

Then he gave the Sister a message to give the poor woman who had been operated upon—

'Tell her I most fully and freely forgive her,' he said, 'and that if there's anything I can do for her, I will. And, Sister,' he added, 'take care of Miss Uraine for me, but don't let her know I asked you to. And take some care of yourself also. Good women are not very plentiful, and good men still less,' and he was gone.

He had put his card on the table, and taking it up she read—

MR. PAUL DIGGORY BLAKE,  
THE KNOLL,  
BROMBRIDGE.

'What a charming gentleman!' she exclaimed.

'So that's it, is it? Lucky Miss Uraine. Probationer Uraine, you'd better come and have your tea with me this evening,' said the Sister, peeping between the screens spread round Mrs. Dag's bed, and speaking in a business-like voice. 'Nurse, will you see that Mrs. Dag is all right till Probationer Uraine returns.'

'Are you feeling better?' said Mora, full of gratitude at being absolved from going down to the probationers' noisy tea-table.

'Oh yes, I'm all right. That friend of yours gave me a glass of wine, and brought me round in no time. What a nice gentleman he is.'

'Yes,' said Mora guiltily, 'he's very nice.'

From five to six she had to sit by the side of the still semi-conscious woman, who moaned now and then, and turned her head from side to side.

'I've sent for an extra for her,' said the Sister, coming up to the bedside, 'there's fear of hæmorrhage, and you are not quite tough enough for that by yourself.'

'Sister,' said Mora anxiously, 'she makes such a strange clucking noise with her jaws. Does it mean anything?'

'Oh no,' answered the Sister with a little smile, 'people make all sorts of funny noises when they've had ether'; and she turned away.

When six came she dismissed Mora with great promptitude.

'Get all the air you can,' she said.

A very comfortable carriage was waiting at the side entrance of the hospital, and Mora entered it with a sigh of luxurious happiness, in which there was some honest regret for her comrades who could not share it.

The coachman had his instructions, and stopping at the corner of Portland Place, the door was opened and Mr. Blake got in.

'I'm going to drive you round about Regent's Park,' he said, putting his arm round her waist, 'and goodness knows how we are to get all you have to say to me into one hour and three-quarters!'

'But what about all you have to say to me,' laughed Mora. 'What were you doing in Carrara, and what brought you home?'

'I've been superintending the preparing of the marble columns for the new Sellcuts,' he said, 'and I intended going back from there to Rome, and had written to your cousin Harry to meet me there on business connected with the electric lighting of the new buildings. It was his letter which brought me back to England.'

'May I know what he said?' asked Mora.

'Of course you may. Henceforth there are no secrets between you and me. He remarked quite casually that they were daily expecting to hear of your engagement to Mr. Ross.'

'That was very unkind of him,' cried Mora. 'It might have kept you away instead of bringing you back.'

'Well, I explain it this way,' continued Mr. Blake quietly; 'he's a kind-hearted, but extremely selfish young man, and can only see a thing from one point of view, namely, his own. He was anxious to inform me that he was no longer attached to you, and he took a mean way of doing it.'

'Do you think he ever was attached to me?' asked Mora.

'Yes, very much so at one time, in his way. But since you've taken some notions of life and usefulness into your head, he's quite done with you.'

'Oh, I'm so thankful!' cried Mora. 'How different you are! Oh, won't father and Ted be glad! And I think mother will too, but I'm not quite sure.'

'Oh, I'll manage your mother if necessary,' remarked Mr. Blake; 'you've been getting along splendidly of late, haven't you?'

Curiously enough he had not heard a word of Dukelle's tragic end; so what Mora could tell him was tremendous news to him, and he became very grave, and spoke in that low voice of his that expressed deep emotion—

'And to think of the useless days I've wasted in tracking him about from place to place to get revenged on him! I'll own up, my darling, I went abroad from our Maggie's funeral—hers who belonged in death equally to you and me—determined to avenge her wrongs, and drag that man to justice, or shoot him myself. I'm ashamed of it, dear. It was in Carrara, when I got Harry's letter, I suddenly made up my mind to let vengeance go, and come back to you, and love, and home. And now to think of the amazing fitness of it all. I wrote to Mr. Simpson from the Langham the day before yesterday, offering him the post of manager of my new theatre at Brombridge, and that enabled his good wife to beg me to come and see this unhappy woman, and forgive her. Then think of her being brought to the ward where you are, and to think that this morning I was a love-starved and lonely man, and now—'

“There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will,”

murmured Mora from behind the hand she was holding to her lips. 'Do you remember this was the last thing Maggie did? Dear Paul, have you ceased to grieve for her?'

'No, not that,' he said; 'you may bury the dead, but you can't bury the memory of them. But I've

long ceased to wish she had lived longer. She died just as she had reached her best, and was beautiful, happy, and good. But sometimes I've dreamt over again some of the horrible scenes we had when she was drunk—and we had three during the first six months of our married life. That was really why I took the Knoll ; it was to get her out of Dukelle's and harm's way. Oh, you don't know how I've thanked God to think she is safe, and that I made her happy while she was with me.'

They were silent for a while, and then Paul pulled out his watch.

'Only a quarter of an hour more ! How can I let you go !'

'You must,' said Mora. 'Tell me, when are you going to see mother and father ?'

'To-morrow,' he replied, and the carriage had stopped at the hospital gate.

That night Mora did not cry either before or during sleep ; but she dreamt that Maggie came to her radiantly beautiful and happy, saying—

'I'm so glad you are going to marry him. You'll make him a far better wife than I could, though I did my best. Love him well for my sake, as well as your own, and his.'

## CHAPTER XXIII

### MRS. URAINE GIVES HER CONSENT

‘I SAY, mother!’ cried Ted, dashing into his mother’s room, ‘who do you think Mr. Ross and I have seen, and shaken hands with just now? Guess !’

‘Lord Clanbinder?’ asked his mother innocently.

‘Oh, no! much better than that—Mr. Blake! He’s come home, and he sends you his kindest compliments, and he will come and see you in half an hour.’

‘Mr. Blake, my dear?’ cried his mother. ‘Oh dear! What will Mora say? How disappointed he will be not to see her! Half an hour! Run, my dear, and tell Parker to put some flowers on the drawing-room table, and light the fire at once. I must change my dress. Tell your father, too, there’s a good boy.’

When Paul Blake was shown into the drawing-room he found Mrs. Uraine hard at work on a piece of very fine crochet, which she had begun so long ago that she had forgotten how to work the pattern.

The fire had gracefully risen to the occasion and burnt up so well, that it did not look as if it had only just been lighted, and though the great room was chilly, it did not matter in the least to the visitor, whose welcome was cordial enough to atone for everything else,

After the first greetings had been exchanged, Mrs. Uraine exclaimed in quite a heartfelt tone—

‘I am so grieved for my daughter, poor child ! She will be so disappointed at not being here to welcome you. She has not forgotten you, I assure you.’

Paul smiled a half-guilty smile, and stooped to pick up a violet that Parker in her hurry had dropped on the rug.

‘The fact is,’ he replied rather slowly, ‘I met Miss Mora quite accidentally at the Great Central yesterday. I had to go there to see a patient who is dying of cancer, and your daughter happens to have the poor creature under her charge.’

‘You’ve met !’ cried Mrs. Uraine ; and such a crowd of small anxieties huddled themselves into her brain, that for a moment she did not hear what Mr. Blake was saying to her. ‘Dear, dear ! I do hope her cap looked nice, and that her hands were clean. I wonder whether the others noticed him ?’

But as the clamour of these queries died down, she heard a voice saying—

‘So I’ve come to ask you and the Colonel to give your consent to her becoming my wife.’

Mrs. Uraine tried to make out that she was hooking the cotton into a rather tiresome loop, for it was not proper to appear in a hurry to part with one’s only daughter, even though she would thus become mistress of so desirable a residence as the Knoll, and wife of such a distinguished-looking and wealthy man as Paul Blake.

But it was of no use pretending ; her hands trembled so that her work slipped on to the floor, and she answered, ‘It will be nice to have her so near.’ So Paul held out his arms to his future mother-in-law, and gave her a most reassuring kiss, just as Ted and Mr. Ross came in, followed by the Colonel.

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'He wants to marry Mora,' said Mrs. Uraine, presenting him to the three astonished men, and there was an untold world of pride, satisfaction, and triumph in her voice.

Late, very late that night did Colonel Uraine sit far back in the lounging chair of the library at the Knoll, enjoying the vicarious odour of Paul Blake's cigar, and the once contraband joy of a near midnight sitting in the familiar room.

'Hadn't you better go round by the back door?' said his future son-in-law a little maliciously.

'Yes,' said the other, 'it's quicker.' And they both laughed a laugh of emancipation from bygone impediments.

'Henry dear!' said his wife, gently opening the dressing-door, 'did you think to tell him that the bishop must be asked to perform the ceremony?'

'No, my dear, I didn't,' he replied apologetically,—'the fact is I forgot it.'

'How thoughtless men are!' she said with a forgiving smile as she shut the door again; and her dreams that night were a strange jumble of a bishop marrying Mora, who would persist in wearing her hospital cap instead of a veil, and having it fastened on with a crochet-needle.

The next day, just as the Sister was sitting down to her tea, she was interrupted by a knock at the door, and on calling out the usual 'Come in!' found herself face to face with 'the nice gentleman.'

'Let me give you a cup of tea,' she said.

'Sister,' remarked Mr. Blake, as he stirred up the sugar, 'I'm going to rob you of one of your probationers—Miss Uraine.'

'I guessed it,' said the Sister; 'but don't please take her away just yet, she's far and above the best

I've ever had. You see she came for three months, and she's only been here about three weeks. Anyhow she ought not to leave the case she's on till it's ended.'

'How soon is that likely to be?' asked Mr. Blake.

'It may be within twenty-four hours,' was the answer, 'or the patient may linger on for four or five days. She's had a very tough constitution.'

'Well, then,' said Sellcuts' manager, 'we'll make it a bargain that Miss Uraine remains with you till the end of her month, you undertaking to take care of her for me, and I'll make some little offering to the hospital as an atonement for depriving it of her services.'

'Would you like to see her here for a while, Mr. Blake?' she said with a knowing little smile. 'I'll take her place for one hour, if you will promise not to detain her after I come back for her.'

'I promise,' he said, 'I'm a business man.'

'Probationer Uraine,' said the Sister in her usual sharp voice, 'you'd better go to my room and have your tea. I'll take your place here for an hour.'

'You are very good to me, Sister,' said Mora gratefully; for in truth it was tiring work sitting hour after hour by a poor thing who groaned so, and who would not listen to any comfort.

'Your mother is supremely happy,' were the words that fell on Mora's ear as she passed into the Sister's cosy room, all unwitting of the presence that lurked behind the door.

'Oh, Paul!'

'So you would prefer rubies and diamonds, would you? Well, you shall have them. But we will wait till you have left here before we put them on,' he said, as he took the measure of her finger for the two precious little rings that had to be ordered.

'I hope we are going to have a very quiet wedding.'

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said Mora reflectively. 'I don't like show. Couldn't we let Mr. Carmichael marry us early in the morning, and get away.'

'No, my darling,' said Paul, hastening to take the edge off the negative, 'we can't have a quiet wedding. Your mother has only one chance of seeing her own girl in all her bridal glory, don't deprive her of it. Then the people of the town who are to make the success of the new Sellcuts' have a right to be considered. It is well to let them feel proud of us on our wedding-day at least. And then'—and he lowered his voice—'you and I are not always going to be young; and some day when I am a crusty old gray-beard, and you are as fat as Mrs. Cox, we shall be very glad to remind each other of how beautiful and graceful we were on our wedding-day; and of how folks said we made the handsomest pair for miles round, especially one of us.'

'I give in,' sighed Mora.

'Your hour is up, Miss Uraine,' said the Sister, coming in with quite a good deal of heavy treading.

'I will come for you then to-day week,' said Paul as Mora left him to go back to her sombre post. 'You shall come to the wedding, Sister,' said Mr. Blake, shaking hands with her, 'but it won't be till June,' and he left the hospital reflecting that a week is a very long time, but he would take care and write to his 'own girl' every day. Then he drove to Grosvenor Place to break the news to the Margetsons, and found that Mrs. Uraine had forestalled him in a long and minute letter to her sister-in-law.

'It's quite a genuine human letter!' cried Lady Margetson, 'and I am out of breath with sheer amazement. She hasn't written to me for years. I don't know how to tell you how glad I am,' she went on,

taking Mr. Blake's hand, for they had made friends in Rome, and she had once thought in the hidden silences of her thinking that Alicia and Mr. Blake made a very nice-looking pair.

'Well, I'm only glad it's not Ross!' said Harry gruffly, for he could not quite forget he had once wanted Mora for himself.

'There never was the least reason for being afraid of Ross,' said Paul drily; 'that was a mistake of yours.'

'Anyhow,' rejoined the young man, 'it's a good thing for you that you're so much older than she is, you'll be able to manage her.'

'I only hope she'll be able to manage me,' sighed Paul mockingly, 'she's so much younger than I am. Anyhow, I no longer stand in fear of you, so you may as well put a good face on it and wish me joy.'

'I do, I do!' cried Harry, 'and I'll be proud to think I am your cousin!'

It was surprising how quickly the news of the engagement spread in Brombridge, and the groups of people who gathered in the evening to watch the growth of the new buildings as they appeared above the hoardings, discussed the pros and cons of the expected wedding with a great deal of want of information and much persistence. But the general impression was that Miss Uraine deserved a good husband, and was in a fair way to get him.

'I wonder what Bleby will say about it,' remarked Mr. Paine to his wife, who had just come down from the nursery, and was preparing for the luxury of a quiet chat by the fire.

'Oh, he'll say the mark of the Beast is on them both, as usual,' laughed his wife; 'but just think what a series of wonderful surprises the coming of Mr. Blake

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to Brombridge has brought with it! Who could have prophesied what sweeping changes that fire at Sellcuts' would bring about.'

'How does Elsie get on?' asked Mr. Paine after a few more remarks on the engagement.

'Admirably,' said his wife, 'I really think we've done well in taking her. Of course her health is the main thing I'm in doubt about. Prison regulations at Craven Gaol seem as barbarous as the treatment at our gaol is humane. It's a monstrous thing. It's bad enough to deprive poor wretches of liberty and human society, it's infamous to rob them of health.'

'But the general idea is that the health of prisoners is better than that of the free people outside,' said her husband.

'I don't believe it!' cried his wife. 'All I've had to do with come out of prison physically broken down—that is, those who've had long sentences. Did I tell you James has thrown Elsie over? He told her she's altered so much he's ceased to care for her.'

'I thought he would,' was the reply. 'She is no longer smart and showy.'

'No. She is something infinitely better than that, poor girl. She is simply beautiful with the children. And such a capable girl! I've promised to let her go up and see Mr. Blake to thank him for all he's done for her. She is going there this evening.'

Thus it was that as Mr. Blake sat in his chair at the writing-table, James announced that a young person wished to see him.

'A young person?' asked the master of the Knoll. 'What does she look like?'

'It's the old housemaid; her that went to prison,' remarked James severely.

'Show her in,' said Paul Blake quietly; and James

was somewhat taken aback on seeing his master shake hands with the gaol-bird, and put a chair for her.

'I never can thank you enough,' faltered the girl.  
'I pray every night that God will reward you.'

'That's all right,' he said kindly. 'And now tell me where are you.'

So Elsie told him how Mr. and Mrs. Paine had come all the way to Craven Gaol to meet her on coming out, and how they had taken her into their service, and were kinder to her than she had ever been treated before.

Then with a faint blush coming into her thin face, she explained that James had severed his connection with her; 'And, of course, that's quite right,' she said humbly, 'I couldn't expect anything else, though the little one died before it was born.'

'Did you suffer much?' asked her former master compassionately.

'I thought I should have died of pain. It's cruel work anyhow, but in prison there seems no human pity anywhere, and you are put to work so soon again.'

'Well now, that's all past,' said Paul feelingly, 'and you've got a fresh start with these good Paines; and there are other men in the world beside James who want wives. You'll make a very good one some day. I took a sovereign from you one night,' said Mr. Blake, opening his pocket-book, 'and I paid it away during your trial—it was soiled money; but here is an honest clean one for you to get something with. Good-bye, my girl.'

He stood a while on the rug lost in thought, and then he rang for James.

'Have you given her up?' he asked.

'Yes, sir,' said James firmly. 'She've lost her character, sir.'

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'She's found a new one, James. It's a very much better one than the one she lost. It's no business of mine, of course, but I think she'll make a good wife.'

'Not for me, sir,' said James, and so the matter ended.

As Elsie was turning the corner to go to her new home, she ran up against Mr. Bleby.

'Where have you been, may I ask?' he demanded suspiciously.

'I've just been up to the Knoll to thank Mr. Blake for all his great kindness to me,' said Elsie, trying to pass him.

'Oh you have, have you?' he said; 'and how much has he given you to hold your tongue?'

'Mr. Bleby, how dare you!' cried Elsie, a little of her old spirit reviving for a moment. 'I can tell you this—Mr. Blake is a far better man than you'll ever be; and much more likely to get to heaven!'

'Oh, so you've had to go to prison to learn that?' he called after her up the street.

'We shall have to deal pretty sharply with him before long, I can see,' said Mr. Paine, after his wife had repeated to him Elsie's account of the hairdresser's remarks and conduct.

'The ex-Mayor, Mr. Falkwright, is meditating bringing an action against him for some of his slanderous stories about his year as Mayor.'

'It's high time some one took him in hand,' was the reply. 'It's enough to thrust a girl back into perdition to be treated in that way, and in the streets too. And to think he was one of your deacons once!'

'There's a black sheep in every fold,' said her husband.

Meanwhile Paul Blake was writing a love-letter of considerable length to one of the Great Central's pro-

bationers, and when it was finished he took it to post himself, strolling back in the moonlight to the top of the road past the Knoll, that he might look down on the new buildings, whose progress was as satisfactory as even he could desire.

'I'm glad Simpson has agreed to become my right-hand man,' he meditated, as the moonbeams moved to and fro on the road with the shadows of the bare branches, 'his wife will supply any deficiencies of his. Mackay and his wife will do very well at the Camelot. Then there's Ferrel, poor chap. I wish he could find a nice wife, he's such a decent fellow; he'll manage the new Sellcuts' Hotel. Harry Margetson shall have the electrical department under his eye. We can put in a capable resident engineer. Then there's the gymnasium and library. I shall want very good men for those. They don't seem to have turned up yet. Also, I shall have to find some admirable woman as rent collector, and overseer of all the dwellings, after Miss Octavia Hill's plan.'

At that moment something soft rubbed against his leg from behind, and looking round he saw Snowball, who was evidently making up to him in a most friendly and appreciative manner.

'Why, my dear little pussy!' he said, taking her up in his arms, 'I'd clean forgotten about you. What a big cat you've grown!' and he buried his face in the soft white fur, as he had done so often before, when Maggie was by, and watching him with those gray-white eyes, under the red and gold of her hair.

The memory startled him, and he turned back, walking slowly homeward, carrying the loudly-purring cat, and thinking how long ago it seemed since those days, when the care of his dead wife had been so heavy and yet so precious a burden.

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'No, I don't want to forget you, my darling,' he murmured, 'and you did your best most wonderfully. But I know you understand, where you are, that I cannot be alone; and she who will take your place loved you as well as I did. I could not have borne it if you had given way to drink again. All my love for you, and yours for me, would have died; and it was infinitely better that you went as you did, peacefully away with our love following you, than if you had sunk into imbecility, and remained to be an awful burden. I dared not ask you to be a mother, my poor Maggie; you could not have borne it. But if ever my child runs about the gardens, and picks the violets you loved so, you will remember how Mora mothered you, and bless her and me from where you are.'

And when he went to bed, Snowball, feeling that something was required of her after his long absence, curled herself up on his counterpane, and slept all night at his feet.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE WEDDING

‘DEAR PAUL—It is a great drawback to me to have sprained my ankle just now, and I can only come if you will invite Miss Chifterling to come with me, as she helps me along. She has been so depressed since Maggie’s death, I think it will put her right to see you and Mora again, and know that you do not bear her any ill-will. Also I wish you would invite her father to come too. It would be a treat to the old gentleman; he’s been so cut up at George’s going into the army.’

So wrote old Mrs. Blake in answer to a joint request from Paul and Mora that she would be present at their forthcoming wedding, and make the Knoll her home for the occasion.

The postman had brought the letter at a time when Mora was having her wedding dress fitted on, a week before the great day that was to give Mr. Blake his heart’s desire.

It was an indescribably beautiful garment; and represented a concession on Mora’s part that is worth chronicling.

At first she had protested that she would wear no other dress than the one that had been Maggie’s. ‘It is sacred,’ she cried, in answer to her mother’s prompt

objection to any such proposal ; 'Maggie loved it, and looked so beautiful in it, and she had it on that first night I ever saw her.'

But Mrs. Uraine objected even to tears, a most unusual proceeding with her. It was unlucky, she said, and it looked very peculiar to wear something that had been worn by another on your wedding-day. The Colonel and Ted being called on for a verdict unanimously sided with her ; and Paul drawing his bride-elect to one side, said : ' Better yield the point, darling, we'll go up at once to London and choose the stuff for a new one.'

Accordingly, the new one having arrived, Mora was exhibiting herself to an admiring domestic group in the morning-room, when Paul came in, bringing his mother's letter.

' I must see you alone for a moment,' he said, after he had gazed at her in overawed silence for a while ; so the group scattered and they were left to themselves.

' I can hardly believe my senses '—and he walked back a few steps to get a better view of the white splendour. ' You certainly are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen,' he remarked, in a tone of deep conviction, ' and that being so, I suppose we must put up with the Chitterlings, father and daughter, and make my mother happy by giving them a treat.'

' Paul,' laughed Mora, ' that dear mother of yours is a most designing person. She means through the medium of a kindness to give old Mr. Chitterling such a crushing blow that he will never be able to recover from it. What is the cause of the feud between those two ? '

' He proposed to her before my father did, and she refused him. My father did not become as rich as old Chitterling did, and after his death the latter had

the bad taste to ask her if she hadn't regretted her choice. So you see she wants to give him his last and final flattening out through the pomp of her son's wedding. As for Miss Lily, she doubtless is anxious to give a backhander to your relations, the Uraines of Brent, by being a guest at your wedding, while they are not even invited.'

'And city people are apt to think that country people are stupid!' cried Mora. 'You'll invite them all three, won't you? It will save further complications. But I do hope Miss Lily won't wear a bright red silk dress.'

While this little conversation was going on between the two lovers, another of a very different sort was taking place between Miss Mimsey, Mrs. Cox, and Mr. Bleby, within the dull and cheerless parlour where the bachelor solitude of the latter was wont to be passed.

Miss Mimsey was very pale, and her voice pitched even higher than usual; Mrs. Cox was red, and her face moist with excitement; while Mr. Bleby leaned his knuckles on the table, which he had taken care to keep between himself and the excited ladies, and was a trifle more spiteful and less self-possessed than in former days.

'You've been telling the late Mayor that I left Ebenezer because he didn't propose to me,' said Miss Mimsey, her thin voice piping up into almost a squeak as she went on; 'and you've told Mrs. Cox I'm setting my cap at Mr. Carmichael the vicar; and I shouldn't have known anything about it if I hadn't asked her point blank why her sister took her girl away before the term was out. Oh you wicked old man, you!'

'And what I've come to say is,' chimed in Mrs. Cox, 'that your heckling and fault-finding ways has brought the Narrow Way Pilgrims so low down, that

from being fifty saved souls it's come to only two, and that's you and me ; and I don't mean to pay half the expense of the iron building any longer to listen to you doing all the exhortation every Sunday, and Cox falling into such heathenish ways that he've been propping up the sofa-leg with the book of family prayers. So there's the key, Mr. Bleby,' she said, laying a large door - key on the table, ' and may the Lord have mercy on your soul.'

'Good gracious !' they both exclaimed as they made a frantic rush at the door, for Mr. Bleby, instead of answer, had gradually screwed his face to one side, and was making a fearful and diabolical grimace at them both.

'Did you ever see such behaviour as that?' cried Mrs. Cox, stopping to take breath in Dr. Slaney's porch.

'The man's mad,' said Miss Mimsey, whose teeth were chattering with fright. 'But I'll bring an action for slander against him. I'll teach him to go making faces at ladies, the brute ! and at a woman of my standing too !'

'So you think we may safely fix October as the time for inviting the royalties to come and open the new *Sellcuts*,' said Mr. Blake to his foreman that evening, as they came out of the white marble porch of the new theatre.

'Yes I do,' was the reply ; 'everything will be in trim by then.'

'Please, sir, have you heard what's happened to Mr. Bleby, sir?' said a man, touching his cap, to the manager-in-chief.

'No,' cried Mr. Blake, turning quickly round, 'what's the matter with him ?'

'He's had a stroke. They found him on the floor

this afternoon with his face all drawn to one side, and it's that way still.'

It was even so ; and for a time at any rate there had come rest to Brombridge and Mr. Blake from the slanders and spleen which had flowed so freely from the hairdresser's now paralysed tongue.

'It's a pity but what he hadn't held out till after the wedding,' said Mrs. Blodger, when she heard it, 'twould have been worth something to hear what new tale he'd take up against Mr. Blake on his wedding day.'

'Serves him right,' said Mrs. Simpson cheerfully, as she nailed down the bright new carpet in the new home. Her lips held a tack or two, which slipped out during her exclamation, and caused her to feel about on the carpet for them, for fear 'baby should catch them on his hands while he's crawling about.'

Thus it will be seen that Mr. Charlie Simpson had become a family man, and that his wife had other occupation of an evening than that of picking paper flowers in a property meadow.

'Not that I've left the stage altogether,' she informed her friends, 'but I've given up regular work. Charlie needs a deal of looking after to keep him well ; and though my old dear can wash and dress the boy as well as I can, she can't tell when he's putting a bit of coal into his mouth, or chewing the cat's tail, till he's done it ; and I'm so afraid of his getting his face scratched. And I've to keep a sharp eye on Maria, she's so fond of dressing up when my back's turned. But I'll always be willing to fill up a gap if Mr. Blake wants me to.'

'It's a judgment on him,' said Mrs. Cox when they told her the news of Mr. Bleby's disaster ; but for what she did not say.

'Ah!' said Mrs. Uraine, and she screwed her mouth to one side in the way that had fallen into disuse of late, and finished up with a significant 'Um!'

But when the wedding morning came Mr. Bleby was forgotten, and a stranger coming into Brombridge would have asked if the Queen or the Prince and Princess of Wales were expected.

Flags and flowers from windows and parapets, lamp-posts supporting festoons, and other decorations of a popular order, were to be seen all along the route from the Knoll corner to the station.

The hour fixed for the ceremony was eleven, but at ten o'clock the great desolate church of St. Columba was packed as tight as it could hold, except the seats reserved for the bridal party.

All the way from the old lych gate to the eastern door was roped with long ropes of roses, and laid down with a crimson carpet; while that indulgent man, the vicar, had had tiers of seats erected for the school-children and the old people from the workhouse, so that they might have a good view of the bridal procession.

As for the weather, never did June behave herself more bewitchingly than on Mora's wedding morning. Her smiling sunshine was of the fairest, her whispers of the sweetest, as they came laden with all the essences of bean and clover fields, mingled with scent of hay and the vicarage cedars; while her hidden bird-choirs sang as though they were bursting their throats to make human beings listen to their antiphone of the weeping that had been for many a night, and the joy that had come on this perfect summer morning.

The Chief-Constable and several mounted police waited in a row with their horses' heads to the lych gate, but with plenty of room for the carriages to

drive up and set down their burdens. Each man had a snowy gardenia or sprig of stephanotis in his buttonhole.

The fire brigade had all turned out in the splendour of their helmets ; and as they marched along the road, and up through the northern door, so as to get into the north gallery in the transept, they looked like a river whose ripples have caught the gold of the noontide sun.

As for the officers of the Royal Brombridge Rangers, their uniforms glowed like clumps of scarlet poppies among the congregation.

At about a quarter to eleven the wedding guests began to arrive, and the children clapped and cheered each carriage with the wildest enthusiasm.

It was a proud sight to see Mr. Blodger's tall form piloting Conrad and Harold Paine up the crimson path, and to see his face when the younger, dazzled by the gorgeous colouring of clothing, carpet, and chancel flowers, all irradiated by the tints of the southern stained-glass windows, asked in a tone of half-choking awe—

‘ Is this the way to heaven ? ’

Of course Mr. and Mrs. Simpson were among the earlier arrivals, as also Mr. and Mrs. Paine ; while Maria, in a new white frock and hat, Mora's gift, was allowed the place of honour at the head of Miss Uraine's class of factory girls, to stand by the door and strew roses in the bridal path.

From the Great Central had come the Sister and Mora's two fellow-probationers, specially let off by the hospital authorities, for the grand occasion.

At last all were assembled and safely in their places, old Mrs. Blake looking superb in silver-gray, and Miss Lily Chitterling and her father beaming with a satisfac-

tion that even the gorgeousness of their get-up could not outshine.

Eleven was striking, and the bishop and the vicar came silently into their places ; when, all of a sudden, through the wide open door burst the sweet sound of the school children and the crowd outside singing the third verse of the Old Hundredth—

‘ O enter then His gates with praise,  
Approach with joy His courts unto ;  
Praise, laud, and bless His name always,  
For it is seemly so to do.’

There was a mighty rustle as of heads being turned, subdued and solemn music stole forth from the organ, and Mora, with a soft and beautiful colour on her cheeks, holding her young head high in the solemn dignity of the supreme moment, came slowly up the aisle on her father’s arm to meet her bridegroom, who had slipped in through a side door unnoticed, with his best man Ted by his side, and was waiting for her at the chancel step.

Alicia and Grace Margetson were sole bridesmaids ; and Harry, and the doctor from St. George’s Hospital, followed behind with Mr. Ross.

‘ Stand close to me, mother,’ whispered Mora ; and Mrs. Uraine had known no prouder moment then when the bishop’s deep voice questioned—

‘ Paul, wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife ? ’ and Paul, from under his brown moustache, said in a low firm voice—

‘ I will.’

‘ Mora, wilt thou have this man to be thy wedded husband ? ’ and Mora, with a sudden gleam of a by-gone memory, thought of herself as on the hill above Bickerton in the twilight of a Saturday evening, and heard her voice saying afar off—

'I will.'

By and by there was the usual joyous uproar, and retiring to the vestry for the signing of names, in the midst of which Dr. Slaney, who had driven up in hot speed from a patient's bedside, came in with Gemini slinking close at his heels. The latter, resolute but abashed, was wearing a bright brand new collar.

'I couldn't get here sooner,' he said to Mr. Paine, 'so I have come in at the finish.'

'No, the beginning,' was the quick retort.

Such a clamour of bells! Such a tumultuous pealing forth of the Wedding March!

Then once more the procession formed, and Mr. and Mrs. Paul Blake, with the voice that breathed o'er Eden sounding in the heart of each, walked over a perfect bed of flowers, and beneath a very fountain of rice, to the carriage that bore them away to the Hall.

'Am I still dreaming?' asked Mora.

'No, my dearest,' said Paul. 'This dream has come true. We will set about dreaming another together.'

'I hope you are satisfied, pa!' cried Miss Lily to her parent as the Bickerton trio drove off to the breakfast. 'It's taken a deal of money to make such a show as that.'

'It's taken a deal more of something else that *you'll* never have,' retorted Mr. Chitterling, who had been obliged to wipe his face a great many times during the ceremony, and had adjusted his pace to old Mrs. Blake's limp, with a new and altogether foreign grace of courtesy; 'there's a deal of things outside money, as money can neither buy nor take away,' he added; and being wholly carried away by the magnitude of his sensations, he retained his old enemy's arm within his own all the way to the Hall, *and she let him!*

'You'll take care of Aurora, mother dear,' said the

bride, as in travelling costume she stood in the breakfast-room with her father and mother and Ted, waiting for the man who was taking her from them, 'she was one of the first things Paul ever gave me ; and I little thought what she was bringing me when he gave her to me out of his arms that night in the library.'

'I'll take every care of her, my dear,' said Mrs. Uraine, gently stroking the beautiful creature. 'I've never liked cats till this one, but she is different from all others.'

The Colonel, who stood by proudly patting his happy daughter's hand, thought within himself that there were other things besides cats before which his wife's prejudices had vanished, on closer acquaintance with a good specimen of them,—even to a once so-called low theatre man.

'Oh dear ! I hardly know what to enjoy most !' wrote Mora to her parents from Milan, where the pair were resting for a few days after three weeks of Switzerland and sparkling snow.

'It is simply impossible to write down one's feelings at such a time and amid such scenes. Sometimes I feel almost scared to think how different it would have been if father and I had gone to Rome with Harry that time instead of to Bickerton with Paul. As for Paul—he has gone out to get me a veil, and himself some cigarettes—I cannot begin to describe what he is like to travel with. I could not have thought it possible that any one, man or woman, could be at once so considerate and yet determined ; so—how shall I put it ?—so able to get his own way, and take care that I have mine at the same time. He never seems tired or dull ; and he enjoys everything so ; he is never out of temper ; and never put out when anything goes amiss.'

'I have not deserved such happiness, I know, and being very sure about that, I should not talk about it even to you if I did not feel very anxious to give all the joy I can now, and in the future, to atone for the sorrow and worry I have sometimes caused you. I must end this now. There is Paul's step at the door.'

On the back of which Paul wrote—'She won't let me see what she has written, so my communication shall also be confidential. When I think of present happiness, and the restfulness of being able to confer where formerly I have had to dictate—of being able to ask for counsel, where before I have only dared to compel acquiescence—and of revelling in the companionship of so fine an intelligence, along with such a delicious capacity for enjoyment, I feel but an unworthy creature at best; yet am content to feel so, knowing she has wrapped me round with her own beauty and love. So we'll manage to stroll along the honeymoon track for at least a month longer, when we shall have to come home for the opening of the new Sellcuts'.

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE PALACE OF AMUSEMENTS

ONCE more the town of Brombridge was *en fête*, and blank walls and vacant spaces were gorgeous with much drapery of huge posters and flaunting bills.

Royalty had come and gone, and the important ceremony of opening the new Sellcuts', otherwise the 'Palace of Amusements,' was over.

Hungry and fagged reporters had industriously subordinated all considerations to the vital one of how to get the best journalistic treasure out of the event for the various papers they represented.

Black-and-white artists and photographers had been hard at work to make it possible for all the world to know how a royal lady's dress looked, and a gentleman carried himself while presenting her with a gold key set with emeralds ; for in this way, as well as with a magnificent bouquet of orchids presented by Mora, did Mr. Blake testify the gratitude due from a town to great folks who show their interest in that town's welfare.

'We have called it "The Palace of Amusements,"' said Mr. Blake, who was looking remarkably well after his honeymoon as he walked beside the princess in the act of escorting her to her carriage. 'The word theatre is still an offence to a great many excellent people, whom

we can enlist on our side if we concede a little to their not always unreasonable prejudices ; also we are departing from some of the traditions of the music hall of old ; and while we shall still have variety performances they will not be night after night as formerly, but ballad concerts, drama, opera, and oratorio will each have their evening in due course.'

The royal lady expressed herself as much delighted with the unique and comprehensive idea of the centre of a large industrial town being turned into a pleasure resort of such varied use and beauty. She greatly admired the white stone palace in the centre, upon whose dome the new gilt figure of Joy shone out in the hazy sunshine of an October afternoon.

She also stopped to watch the stately strut of a gorgeous peacock as he spread his fan in the lights and shadows of the great marble columns, while the cooing of the doves in the carved frieze above seemed to bring St. Mark's and Venice a little nearer England.

She had visited the gymnasium, the library to the left of the square, and the pretty hotel at the corner, where Mr. Ferrel and his staff stood bareheaded as she passed ; also the recreation building, which occupied all the other side of the square, where cricket could be played on a winter evening in the basement, on an asphalte floor, beneath arc lights duly protected from 'skiers' ; or lawn tennis on the ground floor. Above these on the first floor was a beautiful dancing-saloon, as well as various reception-rooms not too grandly fitted up to keep humbly dressed people from feeling happy in them. While over all were the superintendent's apartments—cosy, airy, well-lighted, well-heated, and calculated, as the manager-in-chief put it, to make people live at their best and not at their worst.

At the back of the palace from the road was another

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building with a large playground partly roofed in, and leading across the street that bounded Sellcuts' estate, to a large meadow that had formerly belonged to the tannery, and which Mr. Blake had purchased and made the children's ground for all time.

As for the building, it was perfectly fitted up with a model day-nursery detached in the most improved fashion from the noise of the floors below, which were devoted to all sorts of healthy games. For the girls and boys who preferred quiet games and dolls, there was a special and most delightful room, in which the cripple and the invalid child might have play in the way best suited to them.

'It is a charming idea,' said the royal lady thoughtfully, 'but do you not think that it may remove the responsibility of parents, and draw away the children from their home life?'

'It might perhaps,' said Mr. Blake, slaying a shrug at its birth, 'but up to now the responsibilities of parents of limited means have not been provided for in the dwellings assigned to them, with the result that in a great many the home life is such that it is the less of two evils to draw the children away from it. Besides,' he added deferentially, with that rare sweet smile of his—'your Royal Highness remembers, no doubt, how a certain queen mother had a pretty châlet built for her children, where, away from their home, the castle, they could learn all sorts of useful arts, and feel they were more or less at play all the time, in a way they could not have done at home. I do not think we can go far wrong in helping Her Majesty's subjects follow her example. The right sort of play, and a place to play in, is one of the greatest needs of Brombridge, as of most other places, and I have humbly tried to supply this need.'

'You have done so in a princely way,' she answered graciously as he handed her into the carriage.

At the same moment Mora was saying to her royal escort: 'It is like some dream city in the light of the ugliness and shabby wretchedness of what went before.'

For a moment the Prince turned to take one more view of the charmingly-laid-out lawn and flower-beds, and the busy flocks of doves on the centre fountain; then turning to Mr. Blake he said, 'A city of pleasure within a city of toil! Long may you and your beautiful wife live to rule over it! I am glad to have lived to see it.'

'The main difficulty is, and always will be, in finding the right people to assist in carrying it out,' Paul remarked afterwards, as he and Mora sauntered down the children's ground in the quiet of the evening before returning to dinner.

'I know of one person who would make a capital resident superintendent of the children's building,' said Mora, 'and that is Miss Pansy Mimsey. We were all very fond of her at school, she was always so kind and good to us. Her two sisters don't treat her properly. She has been their Cinderella, and she never complained. She is an excellent manager.'

'She shall have the appointment,' said Paul, making a note in his pocket-book. 'Any one else?'

'I think Mr. Ross would like to take charge of the library and lecture department. He says Ted is sure to pass in January, and won't need him any more.'

So Paul made another note in his book.

'I believe Ferrel is thinking about following a good example,' he resumed after a pause; 'he asked me last night if I had any objection to his courting Elsie More. I said not the least. It's a great thing in a scheme like this to get the service of people who are bound to

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you by ties of gratitude, and both Ferrel and Elsie are that.'

'How is Mr. Bleby getting on?' asked Mora.

'He's just the same. He can still only speak one word, and that is the word "beast." Whatever question you ask him he can only get out that one fatal word. That's the way in aphasia, Dr. Slaney says. The patient tries to reply, and can only make use of one word. It's very sad. Poor Bleby. He may get over it in time.'

'Well, I should think he won't want to dabble in the mark of the Beast any more, he'll have had enough of it.'

As the pair were returning they met Mr. and Mrs. Paine with their four children, accompanied by Mrs. Simpson, and Maria, who was proudly wheeling the baby in all the pomp and circumstance of a brand new carriage.

'We were just saying what a change has been made in this place,' said the minister as he walked on by Mr. Blake. 'My wife remembers the time when there was a most miserable lot of tumble-down cottages, with an evil-smelling horse-pond on the spot where you have erected all those swings in the children's ground. It used to be called Fever Town by the wags. Then think of the tannery, and the pent-up rookery behind it, where now you have the children's building, let alone all the public-houses that have been done away with, besides the Cut, and that other undesirable building—the old Sellcuts'. It is perfectly marvellous to look upon such a transformation scene.'

'Dukelle was of some use after all,' said the manager-in-chief.

'I suppose some day when we know the whole of life instead of only a part,' said Mrs. Paine, 'we shall

understand that its sins and sorrows, instead of being curses with which God is unable to cope, are forces that His love is controlling for our ultimate redemption.'

“That nothing walks with aimless feet,  
That not one life shall be destroyed,  
Or cast as rubbish to the void,  
When God hath made the pile complete,”

said Mora. ‘That was the verse for my husband’s birthday in my *Tennyson Birthday Book*. Do you remember it, Paul, and how ignorant I was when you gave it me?’

‘We are neither of us as ignorant as we were then,’ said Paul tenderly as they left the others and turned homeward. ‘And I think we both know something of the meaning of the words—

“There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will.”

June again, two years after the wedding ; and Mora, looking happier and more beautiful than ever, had come across from her old home, bringing her parents and Ted to have afternoon tea at the Knoll.

‘Has your master returned yet, James?’ she inquired of the somewhat stouter groom of former days.

‘Yes, ma’am. He’s in the library. But he told me to say if any one called that he’s particularly engaged just now, and has some one with him.’

Then approaching nearer he whispered confidentially—

‘It’s the baby, ma’am, he took it away from nurse a good hour ago.’

‘Go in there !’ cried Mora to her visitors, indicating the drawing-room ; and passing swiftly down the

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corridor, and the corner where the aviary stood as on that memorable evening when she first saw it long ago, she stole quietly into the library.

There she saw Paul standing by the oak bureau with a large white bundle in his arms, a bundle of white cambric, and baby, endeavouring to pat the sleek head of Snowball with the soft hand of his tiny daughter.

There was such a look of concentrated love and pleasure irradiating his face that his wife paused for a moment before disturbing him, and then stealing up to him on tiptoe murmured into the ear that she kissed, as she did so—

‘Darling, I believe you’d eat that child if I didn’t keep a sharp eye on you?’

‘Perhaps I would,’ he replied, shifting the white bundle on to one arm, while with the other he pulled his wife up close to them both. ‘But you don’t wonder at the joy it is to me to have this precious thing in my arms all to myself, and know it is mine, when you think of the heart-hunger I had to bear all those years till you married me!’

THE END



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